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MISS FORRESTER.



MISS FORRESTER.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF "THE MORALS OF MAY FAIR," "CREEDS," "THE ORDEAL
FOR WIVES," &c. &c.

"The leopard follows her nature as the lamb does, and acts after leopard law; she can neither help her beauty, nor her courage, nor her cruelty; nor a single spot on her shining coat; nor the conquering spirit which impels her; nor the shot which brings her down."—ESMOND.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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PART V.



MISS FORRESTER.


CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST LINK IN THE CHAIN.

As a rapid sketch of Honoria Forrester's career, not the careful delineation of a score of other people, is the work that I have set myself to accomplish, the reader must excuse me if the accessories of my picture are but faintly blotted in ; and if two or three figures alone receive such finish as it is in my poor power to give.

When, shrinking and leaning upon Bryanstone's arm, Nelly Bertram found herself on the lawn of Lowick Place next morning, a party of twenty or thirty persons were already assembled there. A defter hand than mine would put all

the picture before you of this assemblage ; every detail clear, sharp, telling as the finish of a Dutch painting. But such capacity is not mine. I might elaborately describe the low grey manor-house, its pointed slate roof, and mullioned windows shining in the noonday sun, and with its two giant cedars casting dense and fragrant shade upon the new-mown grass ; I might describe old Sir Harry's silver hair and bland insincerity as he glided hither and thither among his guests ; his daughter's haughty face and cavalier air, as, with the independence that long-motherless young ladies of thirty are apt to gain, she confined her attentions solely to the men of the party ; I might record that Lady Susan and Lady Alathea Clinton were tall and blonde and drest in blue, while Gracie Haigh, short and brune, and already weighted with six seasons' experience, was drest in pink. But when I had given you such a catalogue—carrying it on through a dozen more people, young country ladies, all in white muslin and innocence, young country gentlemen in velvet shooting-coats, and betraying extreme distrust of their own conver-



sational powers—by how much would you be furthered in your interest concerning what I have really got to say? None of these people interest me; none of them have a hold upon my imagination; while, in sharp contrast, two figures rise clear, vivid, living before my sight just as they did before Nelly Bertram's on the fatal day when she first saw them come across Henry Bryanstone's path. One of these is Honoria Forrester; the other I will shortly attempt to bring before you.

"We'll go away from the crowd, Nelly," Bryanstone remarked, when, Miss Surtees having given her two cold fingers, he saw how unnoticed and unamused the girl was likely to be. "There's Miss Forrester, tired already, sitting with Arundell under the cedars—shall we go and join her? No, it isn't Arundell," he added, after they had walked on a step or two; "Arundell is yonder with Gracie Haigh. Whom in the world has she got hold of now?"

She had not got hold of anything very alarming to the most jealous or suspicious lover's peace. Miss Forrester's companion was a man

of about thirty ; a short, high-shouldered man, singularly slovenly drest in a well-worn grey morning suit, and with the rustiest brown wide-awake you ever saw a gentleman have upon his head. His face was not absolutely ugly, or even unprepossessing. It was a determined, dogged, Jewish face ; but the black eyes looked at you full, calm, unabashed. You associated him at once with the lowest grade of book-making men at races, with gentlemen of the prize-ring, with the small back-parlours of cigar-shops in which sherry-and-soda is given gratis, and loans, on good security, at twenty-five per cent., to the young in difficulties. But your mind did not go much further. You assigned professional black-guardism to him, as a thing of course ; not amateur villany in any of the Protean forms with which modern fiction has made us so familiar. And you were right. Anthony Stretton was simply a very common-place blackguard, indeed. He was not, I verily believe, depraved. He loved money, he loved pleasure ; he was indifferent as to how he came by them. He had neither the ambition nor the ability, unaided, to

become more than the thoroughly vulgar scoundrel that he was.

In addition—I should rather say, in glaring juxtaposition—to his dingy clothes, Mr. Stretton wore a huge breast-pin of a very undraped ballet-girl, carved in pink coral; a chain, a cable rather, of suspiciously yellow gold; and as many rings—turquoise rings, signet rings, sapphire rings—as his short, broad, gorilla-looking fingers could carry. I may add that his black hair was long and stiff with pomatum; his whiskers arranged into two shining sausage-rolls from his temples to his chin; and that his really well-got-up feet were displayed to the full by the peculiar fashion in which his drab-coloured cords were made to fit tight round the ankle. A hideous white bull-dog displayed the hair-lip which is the blue blood of bull-dogs close behind his heels; and, from the genial expression of his face, seemed perfectly ready to make short work of any or all of the company at the slightest intimation of his master's will upon the subject.

“Mr. Bryanstone!” cried Miss Forrester, holding her hand out to him as he came up.

“What in the world have you been doing with yourself? I have not seen you since yesterday at dinner. Let me introduce you to Mr. Stretton—Mr. Stretton, Mr. Bryanstone. Such a surprise for me, fancy! As we were sitting down to breakfast this morning, Mr. Stretton walked in; one of my oldest friends, just returned from Rio di Janeiro, and found me out here; and now dear old Sir Harry thinks he must have been very intimate a century ago with Mr. Stretton’s father. So strange, isn’t it?”

And she looked with the look of perfect ease and thoroughly unmeaning kindness that only a French woman can give at Nelly.

Bryanstone responded to the familiar nod Mr. Stretton accorded him by a profoundly cold bow: then he introduced Miss Bertram to Honoria.

“Come, and sit down by me,” she said instantly, and making room really, not conventionally, for the girl at her side. “I’m not going to shoot in the first match—are you? Oh, you don’t shoot? Really! I thought all girls shot in the country. Upon my word it’s a great deal

of trouble for nothing. I never got one prize this summer. Think of that, Mr. Stretton," turning round to that gentleman. "I've been shooting at every match and archery fête in Essex for the last three months, and have not got a prize yet."

"Well, that's only fair," was his answer. "Lucky though Miss Forrester is, even she can't expect to get all prizes and no blanks."

It sounded to Bryanstone simply a somewhat coarse compliment to her beauty; and regarding it so, he could not but remark the deep flush that passed across Miss Forrester's face. But Mr. Stretton evidently saw, or thought he saw, some deep or humorous meaning in his own speech. He repeated it; he chuckled over it; he glanced, repeatedly, into her blushing face; and finally was so overcome with the sense of his own wit that he seemed obliged to walk it off, for he rose, took one or two short turns, by this time shaking with that suppressed noiseless laughter peculiar to all the Hebrew race, and finally disappeared, closely followed by his dog, into one of the side-walks of the grounds.

Then, and not till then, did Bryanstone speak.

"Where, in heaven's name, did you pick up that man, Miss Forrester?"

"You may well ask," said Miss Forrester, smiling. "Did you ever see such an odd being in your life? Who'd guess that he had taken a high degree at college, or came of a really respectable family? Confess now, when you saw me with him just now, you thought that (like the heroine of one of your English novels) I had taken a sudden fancy for Sir Harry's head-groom?"

Not a woman living ever told falsehoods better than Honoria Forrester. In many of her accomplishments she was commonplace enough: in others on a par with the very few only; but in this she was simply unrivalled. The lies of inferior artists are sure to be either over-finished, or too weakly sketched. Hers were truth itself; the very perfection of all art—nature so exquisitely embodied in art as to be nature still.

She was at this day, she was at this moment, in the most difficult position in which any human being could be placed. A tone too eager,

a tone not eager enough, must have aroused Bryanstone's suspicions; and by virtue of these few quiet words she not only laid suspicion aside, but, as he himself told her afterwards, made him ashamed of the rudeness of his own remark.

"I never thought it possible Miss Forrester could, of her free-will, be in any unworthy position," he answered, quickly. "But I did think some stranger, of whom you 'knew nothing, had contrived to get himself introduced to you. Of course, if Mr.—Mr.—, this person we speak of, is an acquaintance of yours, it's a sufficient recommendation of him. How well Gracie Haigh looks to-day, does she not? She's one of the very few women whom the exigencies of archery bring out to advantage."

"Do you think so?" said Miss Forrester, carelessly turning her head one instant towards the young person spoken of, then looking away again. "Well, yes, I think poor Gracie does always look better in a high dress" (the Haighs, instigated by Lumley, had been taking her about with them half the summer), "now that she has grown so thin. It's frightful how a few London

seasons tell upon one's good looks," she added, addressing herself to Nelly. "You country young ladies are fully indemnified for the quiet lives you have to lead by the time you retain your youth. Who'd guess, to look at me now, that I am only three and twenty, and I am only three and twenty, Mr. Bryanstone. I carry about the certificate of my baptism with me to show to anybody who says I'm older."

"You don't mean to say you were ever baptised?" returned Bryanstone, looking straight into her eyes. "Well, I shouldn't have given you credit for such weakness as that."

Nelly Bertram saw considerable profanity and not the slightest wit in this remark: consequently she did not smile. Miss Forrester remarked and commented on her gravity instantly. "Mr. Bryanstone shocks you, I see, Miss Bertram. He used to shock me once upon a time, but really I'm getting too used to everything to remember when to be shocked and when not. What, the first match over already? Then I must be getting my armour on. Mr. Bryanstone, will you help me?"

She stood up, holding her arm out while he buckled her sheath on ; and then, looking at her full, Miss Bertram was able to make up her mind more fully than she had done yet on the subject of Honoria Forrester's beauty.

[“ She was liker to what Uncle Frank tells me of Reubens's women,” Nelly recorded in her diary, two days later : a diary full of attempts at fine writing and extreme childishness, as became her age ; “ liker to one of the old Fleming's *sensuous divinities*, all healthy carnation and white, and solid flesh and blood, than any English-woman I have ever known. Her hair alone made her beautiful ; such a mass of supple golden-yellow hair as it was, with here a tress of redder, brighter hue running through its silky abundance. No man, after looking at her hair and vivid skin, and round rich lines of figure, could, I am sure, ever stop to ask himself whether Miss Forrester was beautiful or not. She took the senses by storm. All *grace* or *intellect* in other women was thrown into a sort of insignificance beside her, just as I have seen my delicate-hued spring flowers look pale when

the great red rose of June first flouts them all with her *imperial smell and colour*. Have you ever remarked blue-grey eyes in which the pupil is always unnaturally dilated, eyes with heavy eyelids and a kind of suppressed glow in their sleepy depths? If you know of such eyes, and their possessor is a woman who loves you still, take heed as you look forward to the day when she will tire of you! If that day has come, look upon yourself as a man with a mark against your name; with a dangerous, deadly enemy, only quiescent now on the principle upon which tigers and *other deadly creatures* usually crouch before they spring. There are the blue eyes that betray, that stab, that poison physically sometimes as well as morally. Miss Forrester possessed them. Her forehead was low, broad, heavy. Her chin massive and slightly projecting. Her mouth well formed, but large, with radiantly white, small teeth, and moist and scarlet lips that never fully closed. For the rest, her hands were fair and blue-veined, but shaped like a man's, and set on vigorous wrists and arms. Her feet and ankles were her best point,

and she knew it, and displayed them, as only *such a person* would, before the eyes of the world! So much for detail. I looked at her as she stood there, her face towards me, her arm held up to Bryanstone, and I decided that her beauty was hateful; decided, too, that it was the beauty to lead men's hearts captive, and that I had about as much chance beside her of winning Mr. Bryanstone's regard, as one of my own Sunday-school children would have had in competing with the best scholars in Oxford or Cambridge for a University prize."]

"Well, what do you think of her?" for Mr. Stretton having come up again to her side, Bryanstone lingered behind with Nelly. "What do you think of the London beauty you were so anxious to hear about? I was right, wasn't I? Her hair and complexion are her best points."

"I don't think I understand beauty," answered Miss Bertram, pettishly. "I don't like Miss Forrester's expression, and I think the shape of her hands hideous. Mr. Bryanstone, it was very condescending of Miss Surtees to invite me here to-day, and very good-natured of

you to take the trouble to bring me; but all I said to you last night was perfectly true. Now I am here no one wants me, no one cares to speak to me."

For answer Bryanstone made her take his arm; led her to the targets, introduced her to the young ladies, introduced her to the men, and himself kept close to her side during the whole remainder of the afternoon.

And this, her first day of pleasure, was the first day of positive pain in Nelly Bertram's life. She suffered acutely—with the wild unreasoning pain of the child that she was. For, amidst all Bryanstone's kindness, all his attention and forethought for her enjoyment, she noted that wherever he went Miss Forrester's eyes followed him; noted the tone in which she spoke whenever they passed each other in the crowd; the expression of flattered vanity, if of no deeper feeling, that came across his face as he answered. The girl was jealous. Can any elaboration be needed to strengthen the meaning of that one word?

CHAPTER II.

MISS FORRESTER FEELS ELECTRIC.

A DÉJEÛNER, or cold dinner, was served upon the lawn at the conclusion of the archery. Henry Bryanstone, in spite of Honoria Forrester's looks, nay, in spite of direct orders from Miss Surtees, made himself Nelly's attendant still; and as Miss Forrester was away—actually out of her sight—the poor child enjoyed the hour of eating and drinking more than she enjoyed anything else on that day.

“And you are quite resolved to leave before the dancing?” Bryanstone whispered to her, after the ladies had risen to leave. “Well, don't go at least before I see you again; I have something particular to say to you.”

Now if Bryanstone had said as much as this to her the day before, Nelly would simply have

waited any number of hours at his bidding. But with fear, with jealousy, with knowledge had come shame. She was no longer innocent enough to be bold: and all she most desired now, was to get quietly away from a scene in which she felt herself to have no place. If—if indeed he wished to speak to her, let him walk over to the Parsonage to-morrow, and speak to her there. It was Mr. Bryanstone's place now, she thought, to wait upon her; not her on him.

There was nothing in the demeanour of any of the young ladies towards her to alter Nelly's resolution when they reached the drawing-room. Miss Surtees was a gentlewoman, and knew what was due to herself in her own house; so she spoke five words to her about her uncle's health, and also told her where she could find some old annuals to look over for her amusement. Miss Forrester did not look at her by any means with unfavourable eyes. She even smiled and nodded with what Nelly thought an insufferable air of patronage whenever she chanced to meet her eyes. But Miss Forrester always collapsed on principle, in the

absence of men ; and she did so now, yawning piteously whenever her particular friend, Gracie Haigh, tried to make her talk. As to the rest of the young ladies, they just ignored Nelly's existence. She was not a thing to fear or rival, or even pick to pieces ; she was nothing. And they talked of their own successes, and of each other's defeats, and of the delightful day they had had, and of the delightful evening they were going to have, with no more heed of her presence than of that of the faded, dislocated court beauties of twenty years ago (those impossible "Finden's Beauties," as they were called) that lay upon her lap.

So when the servant announced that Miss Bertram's man had come for her, Nelly obeyed the summons with exceeding willingness ; and felt, more than she had ever done before, how good and home-like old Pearce, the gardener's face looked to her when she found him in the courtyard, waiting, laden with wraps and umbrellas, for her departure. She had already reached the gate that led out from the east fruit garden to the open, warren without, when she heard a

quick and well-remembered step following her along the gravel path.

“You don’t mean to say that you are going to start,” said Bryanstone. “Why, it’s utter madness for you to do so. Silly though you stole away, we saw you from the dining-room, and Sir Harry sent me after you at once to say that he would not allow you to leave his house. Before another quarter of an hour the storm will have burst.”

Miss Bertram had foreseen no storm : she had watched other portents too eagerly to note those of the sky. But at Bryanstone’s words she looked up at the clouds at once, and, like all the children of the moors, was too much used to every sign of weather not to see in a moment that his prognostication was true. Dense and low-lying though the black clouds were, a lurid brightness made every minute object upon the warren vividly distinct. The air was silent with a death-like silence. The sheep and cattle from the moors had already gathered, in uneasy crowds, under the shelter of the garden-walls.

“Master seen it were a-coming, master did,”

said Mr. Pearce, oracularly; "and my missis and me, we seen it too."

"And so came for Miss Bertram at the exact time when she would have it at its height," said Bryanstone. "A very pretty piece of consideration."

The remark was wholly lost upon Mr. Pearce, who, in common with most of the people of the district, regarded everything that occurred as inevitable—himself as a machine, and the dictum of persons above himself, as immutable decrees of Providence, against which it was not his place to rebel. The parson had ordered him to come for Miss Bertram at such an hour. Sir Harry, a higher authority still, ordered Miss Bertram to remain at The Place. These were the facts Mr. Pearce's mind grasped; and with the perfect natural breeding you so often see among the old and untaught poor, he moved away a few steps from the door, and turned his face up to the sky with an expression, innocent alike of opinion on any subject, or consciousness of any person's presence, while Nelly discussed with Bryanstone as to the possibility of her return.

A sudden lightning flash, followed by a prolonged but still distant peal of thunder, brought her doubts to a close. It would have been worse than folly to set off for a two-mile walk across a perfectly shelterless common, at such a time, when she had the choice of shelter close to her hand, even though she should have to watch Miss Forrester's flirtations, and look at "Finden's Beauties" till midnight.

"There's a fate in all these things, you know, Miss Nelly," Bryanstone remarked, as they returned towards the house, followed cheerfully by Mr. Pearce, who, fatalistic though he might be in other matters, had doubtless individual ideas of his own respecting the cold meat and ale of the servants' hall. "A fate in these things. Who can tell what results may be destined to spring from such a seemingly trifling thing as a thunder-storm keeping you here to-night?"

A fate. How often did those words of poor Bryanstone's come back upon Nelly's mind hereafter? A fate, a bitter fate indeed was bound up in all that took place that night. At the time, however, his speech, and the cheerful tone it was

spoken in, made her courage rally. If Mr. Bryanstone was really going to continue friendly with her, what mattered supercilious young ladies, and stiff hostess, and superbly condescending Miss Forrester? Superciliousness, condescension, "Finden's Beauties," neglect — could she not gladly bear it all?

Honoria was much too thorough a woman of the world not to pay attention to any passing fancy of the man she meant to win. When Nelly re-entered the drawing-room on Bryanstone's arm, Miss Forrester came forward at once to meet her. She was really glad, and both face and voice were real, that Miss Bertram had not ventured out on such an evening. Of course Miss Bertram was going to remain all night at Lowick Place? That was right. She must share her room, then. A little thing like Nelly would be frightened to death if she found herself alone during a thunder-storm, in one of the great blue, or green, or yellow chambers of The Place. After which affectionate remarks, she took the girl off to her own room at once, to make her toilet for the ball.

Now Miss Bertram's toilet consisted, naturally, of the plain muslin frock she had worn all day; but Miss Forrester made the most of it by lending her a sash and bracelet of her own, and arranging one or two natural flowers in her hair. In doing this, Honoria was simply following her impulses. Everything about her, to a certain extent, was *en grand*. She could have ordered a rival or twenty rivals to be put to death—if it had been in her power—without a scruple; but she would have helped each one of them to dress herself to the best for her execution. Honour, as you and I understand it, she had none; but she had an instinct, commoner in men than in women, which withheld her from ever taking a certain class of small and dirty advantages. Dozens, scores of women, I have known, who hadn't it in them to approach within leagues of a perilous vice. I never knew one so thoroughly generous in all such small matters as allowing her adversaries choice of weapons, or of ground, as Honoria Forrester.

A waltz began to play as the two young women entered the drawing-room, and Bryanstone came

up at once and asked Nelly to dance it with him. "I have given up dancing years ago, in London," he remarked; "but in the country, and with a lady of your size, Miss Nelly, I feel I could figure away all night." At the same moment Mr. Stretton invited Miss Forrester to be his partner.


"For a waltz?" was her answer, looking steadily in his face. "Mr. Stretton, I did not know you danced fast dances."

"I have learnt a good many things of late," he replied. "We used to have very gay balls in Melbourne, I can assure you."

Melbourne! What had Mr. Stretton, who had just returned from Rio, to do with Melbourne? The contradiction struck Nelly Bertram in a second; and it, or some other thought, seemed to flash across Miss Forrester too, for she flushed up suddenly, and put her hand without speaking within his arm. Bryanstone stood still and watched them as they went off. Mr. Stretton did not dance ridiculously badly; but a large woman, however graceful, can never look to advantage as she waltzes with a short and thick-set man of such a build as his.

"I hope our performance will be rather better than that," he whispered to Nelly, after watching them right round the room. "You ought to dance well, Miss Bertram. I can generally tell by a woman's hands and feet, whether she can dance or not."

Nelly Bertram did dance well. It was her solitary accomplishment. Mr. Bertram, who despised most feminine graces, had a fixed opinion as to dancing being good for the development of muscle, and so from the time Nelly was quite a little child, she had been sent to join the dancing class at their nearest market town. When the dance was over, Bryanstone led her out into the verandah that opened from the ball-room, and began to pay her compliments; outrageous compliments, such as men of his age do pay plainish little girls of hers. She danced like a sylph, did she know that? Would she promise him five more round dances immediately? If she would not he would leave the ball-room at once, and not come near it any more. The flowers she wore in her hair were beautiful, and beautifully arranged——



“Arranged by Miss Forrester,” Nelly interrupted him sharply, for his fine speeches were not pleasing her to-night as they had done before. Now that she saw him with other women, she knew that he treated her like a child. She would rather have had no complimentary words from his lips. “My flowers were arranged for me by Miss Forrester. You recognise her touch, no doubt, and that is why you admire them.”

They were standing at the far and dimly-lighted end of the verandah, and, while she was speaking, it occurred to Bryanstone to take hold of her hand as it lay upon his arm. Don't men often do so, half in play, half in love-making, to a little girl they have never looked upon in the light of a woman? “Miss Forrester!” he repeated, in the low, caressing voice that thrilled through every fibre of Nelly Bertram's frame. “What in the world should I know or care of Miss Forrester, and why should you be jealous of her, Nelly?”

The rustle of a silk dress made them both start round; and there, close beside them, were

Miss Forrester and Mr. Stretton. It was next to impossible that they could have avoided hearing Bryanstone's last remark; they must have seen that his companion's hand was in his; and, conscience-stricken and horribly ashamed, Nelly Bertram stood silent, waiting for the enemy to speak. Even Bryanstone, for one moment, was not thoroughly at his ease. At all events he changed his position in great haste, and began, with unnecessary interest, to descant upon the appearance of the night.

"Yes, the storm is holding off still," said Miss Forrester, in her quiet steady way. "But I am certain we shall have it to-night, nevertheless. I never feel as I do now except when a thunder-storm is near."

"How is that?" Bryanstone asked.

"Electric, Mr. Bryanstone. Look at me."

He looked at her until the colour burned on her face. "Miss Forrester, are you engaged for the next dance?"

"The next? yes. After that comes a quadrille; will you have it? No? Well, then, the next. The third from this, a waltz."

“Thank you.”

She walked away with Mr. Stretton, who, either because he had dined, or from some other influence, was quieter and more obedient than he had been in the morning, and again Bryanstone stood and silently looked after them. Contempt, aversion, were upon his face, Nelly thought; but with them was blent another expression she had not seen there a quarter of an hour before in the ball-room. Not love, not admiration, not jealousy; but yet something nearly akin to all three—the feeling that it was in Miss Forrester’s power to elicit at will from men’s hearts, even the best, or the most love-proof among them all.

They stood there without speaking for five minutes or more, watching the figures pass and repass before the windows of the ball-room; then the music struck up for another dance, and Bryanstone recollected Nelly’s existence. “That’s the best galop that was ever written,” he said, in his usual kind way. “Come in, and dance it with me.”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Nelly answered,

as steadily as her choked-down tears would let her; "but I don't think I care much to dance again."

And then she danced it with him. What would Nelly not have done that he had asked her? Then she sat by him while they danced the quadrille that followed; and then—then the hateful notes of the expected waltz began, and he left her and went to Miss Forrester's side.

Her dancing was a dream. On the stage it might have been nothing; but among ball-room dancers it was pre-eminently good. As she glided before Nelly Bertram with her blonde head almost resting on Bryanstone's shoulder, her eyes upturned, with what she would herself have termed her "electric" look, to his face, the poor little girl felt how irresistible such a woman must be if she chose; how five minutes with Miss Forrester in his arms must undo all the progress her own plain face had slowly won for her up till now in Bryanstone's regard. Moral worth, mental fitness,—what weight would these have in the scale when added to her poor commonplace face and figure, and set against beauty of such a type as that?

"She waltzes well, no doubt of it," said a man's voice close to her ear. "And she's a monstrous fine-looking woman when she's dressed. There's no denying of that."

Miss Bertram turned; and, to her exceeding disgust, found Mr. Stretton seated at her side. "Miss Forrester is a very good waltzer, and so's her partner," he proceeded, his former observation having called forth no answer. "Don't you think so, Miss?"

"Mr. Bryanstone dances well," answered Nelly, forcedly. "Of Miss Forrester's dancing I have not seen sufficient to be able to form an opinion."

"What? You're a stranger in these parts, then, eh? Don't know if that's been going on long or not?" And he glanced with special meaning towards Bryanstone and Miss Forrester as they again passed before them. "One or two here tell me they think it has rather a serious appearance, and, begad! I think so too. It would be a good thing for both parties. My friend, Miss Forrester, has youth and beauty on her side. Mr. Bryanstone, I hear, has money and the prospect of a title?"

The tone of his last words was hesitating ; Miss Bertram felt that he meant to question her, and answered curtly, " Yes."

" Mr. Bryanstone has money ? " he persevered ;
" you know it ? "

" I have heard so."

" And a title in prospect ? "

" He is heir to a baronetcy, if you mean that."

" Miss Forrester told you this ? "

" I never heard Mr. Bryanstone's name from Miss Forrester's lips. I scarcely know Miss Forrester." And Nelly drew herself up and gave him a look which she intended to express pretty clearly, " nor do I wish to know Miss Forrester's friends."

Mr. Stretton was not in the least affected by her treatment of him. On the contrary, what she said appeared to have afforded him satisfaction, for he sat, cheerfully drumming upon his knees with his fingers, and watching Miss Forrester's movements with a sort of satisfied air that irritated his companion inexpressibly, as long as the dance lasted. When it was over, he went and stationed himself by the window which

opened on to the verandah, and as they passed out Nelly saw, though Bryanstone did not, that Stretton whispered a word into Honoria Forrester's ear.

She gave him a quiet affirmative glance for answer, then went out into the open air with her partner ; and Nelly Bertram, during a space of time that seemed to her an eternity, had to sit alone and con over her first bitter lesson on the subject of men's infidelity. It was quite late in the evening before Bryanstone even remembered those five round dances that he had implored her to give him !

CHAPTER III.

ON THE LEADS.

MISS FORRESTER'S bed-room was one of the few modern rooms that Lowick Place possessed. The ball-room on the ground floor, and a billiard-room and two or three sleeping apartments over it, had been thrown out from the main building by Sir Harry on his marriage ; and one of these apartments was Miss Forrester's. A dressing-room, in which a temporary bed had been made up for Nelly, led from it, and the windows, both of the sleeping and the dressing-room, opened out upon the top of the ball-room verandah. This verandah had a sloping leaded roof ; but as an ornamental iron balustrade ran round the lower ledge, it would have been by no means an impossible, nor indeed a perilous, undertaking for a man to make his way along the roof

from the billiard-room window to Miss Forrester's—a distance, perhaps, of twenty or thirty feet.

Glancing out upon the night, Nelly, to whom the locality was of course familiar, made some remark of the kind, simply to introduce subjects unconnected with Bryanstone and with her own unhappiness, to Miss Forrester.

“Nonsense! what should put such things into your head?” cried Honoria, sharply. She was standing gazing, fixedly, critically, not with vanity, but with a sort of hard business-air, at the reflection of her own handsome person in the glass. “What should any one want to break his neck crawling about on the sloping roof of a wet verandah for?”

“I merely said such a communication would be possible,” answered Nelly; “why, I climbed myself along more difficult places than that once when the plumbers were mending the Parsonage roof.”

Miss Forrester just shrugged her shoulders as if the subject were really too childish to interest her, and then asked Nelly carelessly to come and

unfasten her bracelet for her. "The storm still keeps off, but we shall have it in earnest before long," she remarked, drawing down the window-blind somewhat hurriedly. "There, did you not see the first flash of lightning already?"

"The second," answered Nelly. "It was in the first flash, some minutes ago, that I made my observation about your window being an easy one to scale. At the same time," she added, "so vivid was the flash that I distinctly saw the figure of a man standing and looking out at the night at the open windows of the billiard-room."

Miss Forrester's colour faded; a very unusual symptom of emotion in her. "One of the servants, no doubt. Old Sir Harry is so frightfully fussy about every bolt and key being seen to before they go to bed."

Nelly Bertram said nothing. She did not think the figure she had seen was that of a servant; and a vague feeling, not of actual suspicion, but yet of vague, indistinct doubt; began to dawn upon her mind. What should any of the visitors be doing at that hour of the night,

alone and without a light, in a position so isolated from all the rest of the house as the billiard-room?

"Mr. Stretton sleeps in this wing, perhaps?" she suggested, "and that accounts for the apparition."

"My opinion is that it was Mr. Stretton I saw."

Miss Forrester turned her head away and begged Miss Bertram for heaven's sake not to make her nervous by saying these horrible things! It would kill her to see the apparition of such a face as Stretton's at this hour of the night. Odious little wretch! All she hoped was that he would take himself off betimes next day. Nothing bored her so frightfully as friends of the family turning up in unexpected places and demanding to be recognised. Asking her to waltz, too! Horror of horrors! Did she look very ridiculous dancing with him? Yes, she needn't ask. She was quite sure she did—and she had seen plainly enough that Mr. Bryanstone and Nelly were laughing at her.

"He may have laughed at Mr. Stretton. I am

sure Mr. Bryanstone never laughed at you," Nelly exclaimed, involuntarily.


In Miss Bertram's tone there was something either of bitterness or disappointment, or both, that roused Honoria's attention. She turned away from the contemplation of herself to which she had returned, and looked hard in her companion's face.

"Did you enjoy the dance to-night?" she asked, when she had examined her features sufficiently.

"Not in the least," Nelly answered; "with the exception of the first dance."

It was a perfectly candid reply; but in a certain limited sense these two women were candid with each other from first to last. Each understood enough of her antagonist's character, and of her own, to dare discard all the hosts of unnecessary falsehoods with which women of weaker calibre encumber themselves in battle.

"The first waltz? You danced it with Mr. Bryanstone. Yes, he does waltz well, but I find him out of practice. He and I are old



friends, you must know. I knew him all this season, and slightly during the last."

"So he told me."

"When?"

"Last night, as I walked with him after dusk in my uncle's garden."

Miss Forrester's mouth relaxed as Nelly answered her in this frank fashion. It gave her positive pleasure to think that, for once, she had met a woman who would shake hands first and then stand up and fight fairly till one or the other should fall.

"After sunset in a garden. That sounds romantic. Miss Bertram, I wonder sometimes what the sensation is of being, as you are now, an unpractised country girl leading the monotonous life of a country village."

"And I, Miss Forrester, would like to be able to taste for once the flavour of such a life as yours! To be plain, to be neglected, is a position in which I think even your imagination may easily place you. It is beyond me to picture the happiness of being beautiful. Of knowing that, good or worthless, faithful or false,

one's own face can encompass whatever prize one desires to win ! ”

It was a sore thought. With Bryanstone's voice, with Bryanstone's eyes as she had last seen them dwelling on Honoria, fresh upon her recollection. Nelly Bertram went away to her own room and undressed, and before she got into her bed tried to pray, poor child, that she might walk, at least with upright steps, along the up-hill stony path that she had newly got to feel her life would be.

When she had been quiet about five minutes Miss Forrester came in. She had not begun to undress ; and now that the flush had left her, Nelly saw that there was a disquieted, weary look upon her face.

“ Would you like a light ? ” she asked, not without kindness. “ I have them at hand, and will light you one if you think you'll be afraid of the storm. ”

Miss Bertram answered that nothing of that kind terrified her. She was not accustomed to a light, and should sleep better without it. “ And I'm thoroughly wearied out, ” she added.

"Storm or no storm, I shall sleep well to-night."

"No doubt," said Miss Forrester, as she turned slightly aside from her companion's eyes. "When should one sleep well if it is not at your age? For myself, I must confess, a thunder-storm does upset me. You see I have not begun to undress yet. If—if—" she positively hesitated—"I find myself getting bad, by-and-by, don't be frightened if I make a rush into your room! Once or twice in my life I have done such a thing as scream."

But Nelly was really worn out; tired in body as in spirit; and whatever of strangeness there was in Miss Forrester's remark, it never struck her then as it afterwards did when she looked back upon all the occurrences of that night. "Come in or scream, just as you like, Miss Forrester; I shall neither be frightened by the storm nor by you."

"And if I did scream," she said quickly, and coming close up to Nelly's side,— "if I did scream and you heard me, and knew I was fool enough to be lying on the floor, con-

vulsed with senseless terror, how should you act ? ”

“ Come to you, I suppose,” was Nelly’s answer, “ and empty your water-jug upon your face. My uncle says that is the best thing for women’s hysterics.”

Honoria laughed, shook her hand, and left her. “ You would act quite right,” she remarked. “ All I wanted was to prepare you for any possible scene. If I scream, come to me.” And then, not quite consistently, she locked the door which separated the rooms ; and Nelly was alone.

But worn out and miserable though she was, forgetfulness refused to come to her. When Miss Forrester left she felt as though two or three minutes only would be needed for her to fall into the deep unbroken sleep which, till now, it had always been her portion to enjoy as soon as her head was fairly laid upon her pillow. But it was not to be so. The longer she remained quiet the more alive became thought, the more vivid memory, the more remorselessly clear reason. “ Your dream is

over—over ! ” repeated the last stern voice. “ You have made up a lie for your own worship, and now you know of what material your idol was fashioned. Henceforth, reality again. The daily task, the monotonous, tasteless duty. Love and life and pleasure are for such as Miss Forrester. For you—oblivion ! ”

The girl had loved Bryanstone just as dearly as it was in her childish heart to love ; and her pillow grew wet with tears as she lay there and communed with her own heart thus. Of the storm, which at every moment increased in violence, she remembered nothing ; of Honoria Forrester, nothing. Jealousy was for the future. What concerned her now was simply her own bitter pain ; not the means by which she felt herself to have been so cruelly, so newly robbed.

About an hour, or perhaps more, after Miss Forrester had left her, Nelly’s heart suddenly beat thick at the sound of a hand stealthily laid upon the handle of the door. A moment later Miss Forrester glided to her side. Instinct—there was time for no process of reasoning what-

soever—prompted Nelly in a second to feign sleep. As her visitor leant over her, moving the candle slowly up and down before her closed eyelids, and so near to her that the girl could distinctly feel her breath upon her cheek, the thought crossed Nelly that Miss Forrester was not unused to this kind of investigation. The abrupt, noiseless entry; the cool, close examination of her face certainly bespoke no novice or unpractised hand; and the thought nerved her into acting her own part with like address. Miss Forrester had not stolen in upon her thus for nothing. Whatever her motives, whatever the game she was playing, Nelly felt she would at least meet her with weapons as like her own as she could command.

She scrutinized her face closely (a pale, wan little face it was); she laid her hand upon the pillow—doubtless to feel if it was wet with the tears of which Miss Bertram's cheek bore witness—then stood for three or four minutes at least by the girl's bed-side. Do you suppose that Honoria felt the faintest approximation to pity as she stood there watching that white and tear-

stained face? Not the very faintest: no more of pity than of triumph. Weakness of that kind had simply no place in Honoria Forrester's nature. She knew all about Nelly's little attachment for Bryanstone as well as if she had told it her in words; saw now that the girl, young as she was, could suffer in silence, and resolved to utilise her. Resolved! Was she not utilising her already?

With the same noiseless step as she had entered, Miss Forrester left the room, and again quietly locked the door that separated her from her companion. Nelly Bertram's sense of hearing was constitutionally acute. It was sharpened tenfold now, both by the already over-excited condition of her brain, and by a sense of she knew not what vague danger that menaced Bryanstone in Miss Forrester's actions. She sat up in her bed, held her hair back with her hands, that she might listen more intently, and, after two or three minutes' silence, distinctly heard a sound, which turned all former doubt into tangible and dark suspicion. Miss Forrester was opening her window-shutter. Where

were her terrors of lightning? Where was her fear of seeing that figure upon the balcony, which she had declared Nelly's words had made her feel? In the dead of night, alone, and isolated from protection, she was deliberately withdrawing the barrier that shielded her, and letting the light from her candle stream forth, like a signal, into the outer darkness.

A signal it evidently was. Miss Forrester's shutters were scarcely opened before a light appeared for an instant, then was extinguished, at the window of the billiard-room. Nelly Bertram had got out of her bed now, and with her heart beating as fast as though she were guilty, was stealthily looking out through the window, which, from the dressing-room being built in an angle of the house, commanded a full view of Miss Forrester's. In another minute a sudden flash of lightning disclosed to her the figure of a man, making his way, in the crouched attitude that the difficulty of the position exacted, along the verandah roof.

One sickening, one revolting suspicion came across Miss Bertram, and then her heart seemed

to stop. She felt that she could have borne anything—any disappointment, any misery—death itself—but not shame like this, for Bryanstone's sake! The blood rushed up into her head. Her limbs trembled till she was fain to clutch at the window-sill for support. Should she stop, should she go, should she call to Miss Forrester that she was ill, and so at least spare them all—them and herself—from further discovery? Just as she began to think that this indeed was the nearest course to honour left open to her, a flash of lightning, longer and more vivid than the last, broke, as it seemed, directly above the house. And this time she saw the man's figure, distinct and clear, as though it had been broad day. It was not—*not* what she had feared. This midnight visitant was no other than Mr. Stretton, after all; and he was already within a couple of yards of Honoria Forrester's window.

Her first feeling—would you have it otherwise?—was she not human?—Nelly Bertram's first feeling was one of intense delight. What mattered Mr. Stretton? What mattered Miss Forrester's honour or dishonour to her? If she

had known that the man was coming at Miss Forrester's instigation to put an end to her, and that they would just walk up to her bed, as one of them already had done, and Stretton murder her, while his companion looked on, with approving pitiless eyes, Nelly felt that she could have been thankful still. This was her first feeling. In another moment all the practical exigencies of her position rose clear before her mind. Miss Forrester was playing a double part with Bryanstone; no doubt at all of that. She was encouraging his attentions as eagerly as a woman could encourage the attentions of any man: and here alone, at midnight, was receiving the clandestine visit of a stranger. Should she return to her bed? Should she give Miss Forrester notice that she was watching? Should she remain silent at her post of observation?

Almost before Nelly Bertram could ask herself these questions, Miss Forrester's voice, subdued almost to a whisper, but still distinct enough for her to hear every word she uttered, fell upon her ear. With the first word the girl's attention

was riveted: the abstract question as to her right of listening forgotten. Is it not so in all the great crises of our lives? We can decide beforehand—we can decide in retrospect what would be right and honourable for us to do. At the moment of action something beyond ourselves—the fall of a leaf, the sound of a footstep, the mention of a name, what you will—is more than enough to turn the balance (always that way inclined) from the side of reason to passion.

Miss Forrester had mentioned Bryanstone.'

Nelly Bertram would have risked discovery—would have braved the imputation of dishonour—to hear what this man and this woman, alone together in the dead of night, could have to say of him.

END OF PART V.

PART VI.

CHAPTER IV. ' .

FROM TEN TILL MIDNIGHT.

"YES ; he seems fool enough for anything," said Anthony Stretton, coarsely, in answer to Honoria's first whispered remark—"fool enough even to believe you. But that's no reason I should stop out in such d—— weather as this, to talk about him ! It's very well for you, you know ; but I'm drenched to the skin already." And as he spoke he laid his hand upon the ledge of the open window, and made an unmistakable gesture of entering the room.

I have remarked, more than once, that Miss Forrester's hand was white, but strong, and thick-set as the hand of a man. She used it, on occasion, as unscrupulously as other women use their tongues. A blow, not so much passionate as deadly — a blow well-aimed, well-timed,

straight out from the shoulder—came like a flash of lightning, right across Mr. Stretton's face, and for a moment made him not alone relax his hold upon the window-sill, but stagger back slightly on his feet. Nelly wondered afterwards if she meant more than mere self-defence by that blow. The place where the man stood was an insecure one. The fall, if he had once lost his footing, would have been one of fifteen or twenty feet, into a paved court-yard below.

A curse, that there is no need to record, broke from his lips—a curse, followed by no measured threats of vengeance, if she dared to exasperate him.

"Then keep your place, please," said Miss Forrester, in her calm deliberate voice. "I've let you come here to talk about business, and also, I suppose, because I'm going to be fool enough to give you money again. But I am not going to have my room contaminated by your entering it, you know."

"Oh, you're not, arn't you?" he answered, mimicking, only that his voice trembled with rage, her quiet, indifferent tone. "Well, now,

I should say myself you've been a good deal more 'contaminated' than that a precious number of times in your life, Miss Forrester. Eh?"

"Unless you can speak of what you came here for I shall shut my window," was her reply. "I neither wish to catch cold, nor to hear anything more than is absolutely necessary from your lips."

"Don't you, indeed?"

"No."

"And suppose I say that you shall hear just as much and just as little as I choose." The light from her candle fell upon his face at this moment, and Miss Bertram saw that it was a ghastly face—a face drawn and livid with passion. "Suppose I say that I've had enough of this play-acting, and that I mean to turn over a new leaf—speak the word that'll ruin you, and make you return to your own position. You understand me, Miss Forrester. Do you think you'd take the trouble to listen to me then?"

"Tell me how much money will buy you off this time, and go!" was her answer. "I shan't stand here much longer."

“Nita!” he cried fiercely. “Shall I tell you what it’s uppermost in my mind to do?”

She never answered him.

“It’s uppermost in my mind to come into your room, and stay there. Stay there—you hear me—till morning, and then, before the whole lot of your great friends, make an end to all this — tomfoolery, as I ought to have done years and years ago, but for your lying promises. Curse you!”

“Oh, this is uppermost in your mind,” said Miss Forrester; and her voice had not the very faintest tremor in it. “Well, I must say you have not increased in sense, my poor Tony, since I saw you last. May I ask what you would gain by the amiable little step you have such an inclination to take?”

“I should gain your ruin,” answered the man, quickly. “Ain’t I ruined, body and mind—aye, and soul too, if there is such a thing? Ain’t I obliged to skulk my life away like a dog? Ain’t I, that used to have the best of everything, brought so low I often havn’t the money to stake among my friends? And you, that brought me

to it, you live like a lady and flaunt in silks and satins, and treat me worse than a dog—strike me, as you did a minute ago. By the lord! I've had enough of it all—I've have had enough of it." And he swung himself suddenly up, and seated himself, with his arms resolutely folded, upon Miss Forrester's window-ledge.

Honorina never moved by one inch. She stood, her face quite close to his, unblenching and unfaltering. Nelly Bertram admired her so. Strong though she was for a woman, her bodily strength was that of a child compared to her companion's. She knew not even of the feeble protection of another woman's presence. She was utterly, irrevocably in the power of superior brute force; and her face was just as calm, perhaps more so, than it had been three hours ago, when, leaning on this man's arm, she followed Nelly and Bryanstone from the ball-room.

"The plan you spoke of this evening is not a bad one for you," she remarked, after a moment's silence; "and for so great a good as getting you out of the country, I am willing to make something of a sacrifice. If you will have

done with theatre (it never had any effect on me, you may remember; I know how to act a little myself)—if you will have done with theatre, and talk sense, I'll tell you how much money I will give you, and on what conditions."

He shifted about uneasily, and did not answer. Then he exclaimed, "Why didn't you speak like this at first, Nita? I'd done nothing to injure you; and the first moment you found yourself alone with me, after all these years, what did you do? Strike me like a dog!" And his voice trembled, not alone from rage.

Honorina looked beautiful as she stood there; her white neck and arms shining in the flickering light; her scarlet parted lips not a yard from his!

"Why I struck you? It wasn't a blow, though; it wouldn't have hurt a fly. My poor Tony, you really need that I should tell you? Well, I struck you, as you call it, for two reasons. First, because I did not choose that you should enter my room. Secondly, because I thought it well to remind you of what I am. You have seen me to-day as Miss Honorina

Forrester. Miss Honoria Forrester, dancing and flirting and intriguing, just like any well-born young woman of them all. If I had given you a soft reception, you might have thought my nature had really altered into one like theirs. It has not, Anthony. I'm as dangerous as I ever was, and, in my own way, I walk as straight. Do you remember that twenty-sixth of September at Homburg? Well, I've the scar upon my temple still, and the same kind of pluck that made me laugh aloud when I got it, in my heart. We can change our positions, but not our natures, you know, can we?"

"You are very handsome, Nita," he said, looking slowly up and down her face.

"So Mr. Bryanstone seems to think. What next?"

"And the greatest devil, I do believe, that God ever let walk upon the face of the earth."

She laughed; quite a cheery, well-pleased laugh.

"I've seen women of every sort in my time, and most of 'em bad—most of 'em bad!" he repeated, emphatically. "I've seen them that

would sit looking sweet in a man's face, and putting their arm round his neck at the very moment when they were selling him to the police, or to his dearest friend! I've seen them that have got to be fine-kept ladies, and would pass their old father and mother starving in the street with a laugh. I've seen them that made a profession of their badness, and them that made it their pride; and once, but that was at the diggins, I saw a woman leave her two children to starve, and run off with the man who'd murdered their father over-night. But strike me blind!" he exclaimed, fiercely, "if you ain't worse than all! Worse? you ain't fit to be named in the same day with them! Some of those I speak of were led astray by vanity, and some by taking fancies for fellows, and some by money, and some by drink. But still there was *something*—something of flesh and blood in them all. And you ——" He stopped for very want of breath.

"I, Tony," said Miss Forrester, calmly, "am swayed by none of these influences. You are perfectly right—except, perhaps, as regards

money; and for that alone I should not care: it must bring rank and position along with it. Who is to blame, please? My parents for bequeathing me my cool nature, or I for inheriting it? I never pretended to goodness, I never pretended to feeling. I have certain views for myself. I am clever. Whatever stands between me and my ambition I will remove. Of whatever can administer to it I will avail myself. Beyond this, it seems to me I am as good as other people. I am living in the great world now, you must remember, my poor Tony; among men of honour, among women of virtue; and I know all the little, daily, familiar practices of honour and of virtue well. I have no doubt there is a difference between me and these people. There must be, of course, when you think how bad I am, but for the life of me I never can make out where it lies! Having one great work on my hands, I haven't as much time, perhaps, for common paltry vices as most women of the world have. In heart we are the same—always with an immense balance of ability upon my side."

A child confessing before her first communion could scarce have looked more innocent than did Miss Forrester as she stood, with her white arms folded, her face calmly turned to her companion's gaze. For a moment Nelly Bertram was shaken in her bad opinion of her rival. Any human being who thus quietly and dispassionately proclaims his moral impotence disarms you, temporarily. And this for a simple cause. It is in the vacillation; in the admixture, however small, of good; in the crushing, in the denying of good; that the majority of minds are accustomed to form their ideal of evil.

"Ability!" echoed her companion, but the passion was gone out of his voice now. "Yes, you have ability, and much good you have done by it! Do you remember what I was when I first saw you, Nita?"

"Well, never very bright at the best of times," she answered; "but well-meaning. I am willing to believe that you were well-meaning, Tony."

"I was the respectable son of a respectable

father, as you know. I believed in a God and in a devil —— ”

“Anthony, don’t be sectarian,” interrupted Honoria, biting her lips, not to laugh.

“And followed the business I was brought up to, and never wronged any man until I knew you. That’s what I was. Look at me now.”

“I do look. I’ve been looking at you a good deal, and at this moment I see that you are drenched to the skin, and I feel myself that I am catching cold. Let us be sensible, Tony. As I said at first, where’s the good of you and me doing the theatre? You want to be bought off again, on condition that you return to Australia—or America, is it? Name your price.”

He swung himself down again to the verandah, and stood silent for several minutes with his back towards Miss Forrester. Then he turned abruptly and said, in a tone of dogged resolution, “A hundred-and-fifty pounds. I’ll not take a penny less.”

“Then your wetting has been for nothing,” remarked Miss Forrester, laying her hand on the window. “I told you this morning that

fifty pounds was more than I have to spare, and I repeat it now. Good-night; and do your worst. I have long made up my plans ready for the time when you, or some other of the cads I was once mixed up with, shall betray me, and you may be sure you will not be a gainer when they are fully carried out."

He swore; threatened; hesitated; and finally they compromised. Miss Forrester agreeing, through some mutual agent in London, to take a second-class passage for him to New York, and pay, in addition, the sum of one hundred pounds into his hands the morning he sailed.

"For the rest," she added, lightly, "if anything worth telling should happen to me I will write to your old address in London. If I fail—but I don't think I shall fail—I will be silent."

"And—and——" the man faltered, visibly overcome by no slight emotion, "you are determined to do—what you told me to-day you would do? If this white-handed gentleman—curse him!—should come to the point, you

mean"—the words came from him with a hard, unnatural sort of laugh—"to marry him?"

"I mean to marry Henry Bryanstone," replied Miss Forrester, deliberately. "He's had a fancy for me, off and on, for the last six months, and I believe would have proposed this season, but for some silly scandal or another that some of his friends were good enough to get up about me when they saw he was serious. However, I think I may say I have him now. He said something to-night, which from a man of his kind almost amounts to a proposal. Yes, I shall marry him. What a day it will be for me! There isn't a word of exaggeration in what I told you to-day, heirship to the baronetcy, thousands a-year, and all. It's every bit of it true. Fortune is evidently smiling on us both, Anthony! With the money I'm going to give you you'll be able to start in quite a respectable way out there—marry a settler's daughter, perhaps, and lead the good, honest, religious, upright life that you always tell me you were meant for!"

She had overshot her mark. Passionless her-

self, Honoria not unfrequently did so from her utter forgetfulness of the existence of passion in others.

“You think even when you’re married I’ll stop quietly away from you, do you?” cried Stretton; and as he spoke he grasped her arm and caught her towards him, with the short compressed violence of sullen rage. “*I* marry? *I* live a life of honest work? And you flaunt your riches and rank as a lady, and spare me a crumb or two, when it suits your purpose, from my lord’s table! With all your ability, you’re a cursed bad judge in some things, Nita, a cursed bad judge! I leave you now. I’ll take your paltry bid, and go away, and leave you free to carry out your plans. You see the move as far as it goes, and you know that the chances are in your favour. I’m a bad subject at all times, and I may get fever again, and this time die of it, or be enlisted for a soldier, or return to the diggins and get knocked on the head. If I do, so much the better for you, and you’ll have won what you staked for. But don’t you think,” his tone sinking into a hoarse whisper,

“that you’ll ever have done with me till I die! For you won’t! I’m open and above-board with you. If you were to marry this fellow, Bryanstone, and paid me yearly more than you’ll ever give me while you live, it wouldn’t keep me away: no money would. I know the flesh and blood I’m made of too well. Some fine morning the old damnation madness, the old damnation jealousy, would wake up, and I should take my passage in the next English ship that left port. Remember this! And remember I never deceived you about it!”

“You hurt my wrist, Anthony,” said Miss Forrester, gently. “Let it go, please.” He did so, mechanically. “And, if you are willing to profit by a piece of friendly advice, listen to what I’m going to say to you. When I am married to Bryanstone, don’t you ever come back! There’s no good in my telling you any falsehoods whatever. The money you get from me now is the last you shall ever touch, and unless you are very tired indeed of your life, you’ll not come back again! I wish you dead now. When I am married I shall wish it

more than ever. Keep out of my way. You'll be safer so."

He looked her steadily in the face : then he said, slowly, and with emphasis, "Nita, if you could murder me at this minute, without fear or possibility of being found out, would you?"

"Of course I would. You know it without asking the question. The more reason for you to keep out of my way when I'm married, as I told you."

"And for that very reason, and because I know you wish me dead, and would help me out of your way if you could, I'll come back," he answered, doggedly ; "I am not going to stop here in the rain, or waste many more words upon you ; but before I go I say this. Whether you marry or don't marry, whether you live in England or abroad, remember one thing—as long as I live I shall come back, in whatever place, and at whatever time I choose. I'll do nothing low. I'll not come suddenly and disgrace you without warning. You shall always have due notice—twenty-four hours, say—of my coming. As long as we keep on terms, I'll not

obtrude on you by daylight, before your husband, or your friends. But whenever you get a letter containing—what shall I say?—well, the time of night you carried on with him just now will do—a letter containing these words, ‘from ten till midnight,’ written in my hand, you’ll know that I am near, and that any night between those hours, you may expect to see me. Nita, good-by.”

He held his hand out, but she never took it. I believe she never saw that it was offered. She was livid; her teeth were fast clenched; her eyes half closed, and fixed with the stealthy look of a tiger’s upon her companion’s face.

“Anthony!” she exclaimed, after a minute or so, and in a voice singularly unlike her usual one. “I am not given to sentiment, as you know, but at this moment I have a presentiment that I can’t get over. Don’t come near me when I’m married.”

“I shall come near you when, and where, and as often as I choose.”

“You are determined?”

“I am; so help me, God!”

“And so help me, God! you’ll repent it if you do.”

She held out her hand to him this time, and he took it, held it irresolutely a minute in his, and then caught it to his lips, and kissed it passionately.

And as Nelly stood for a moment and watched him, after Miss Forrester had shut the window, and he remained standing there alone in the darkness, she felt—child though she was—by how much the man was the better of these two. For the man had passions still.

CHAPTER V.

A LOVE-LETTER AND A LOVER.

WHEN Honoria awoke the next morning, a feeling, such as she had scarcely ever experienced in her life before, overcame her; the feeling of severe bodily illness. Her eyes felt hot and heavy in her head; her mouth was parched; her limbs trembled under her, when she stood up and tried to dress. She went into the dressing-room Nelly had occupied, and found it empty; then rang the bell, and was informed by the maid who answered it, that Miss Bertram had returned home before seven o'clock that morning.

And Mr. Stretton?

Mr. Stretton had gone too. A letter he got by post obliged him to start for London at once. And here was a note he had directed to be given to Miss Forrester.

Miss Forrester took it without the slightest show of anxiety; then looked at her watch, and sent a message to Miss Surtees, asking to be excused from appearing at breakfast. "If you will bring me a cup of tea, that is all I shall want," she added, in answer to the girl's inquiring glances at her white face. "I am a little tired, and shall be quite well when I am dressed, and can get in the air."

But she felt convinced that she was not going to be well. She had known nothing of illness herself; but she had seen enough of the first fever symptoms in others to be sure of what these trembling knees, these heavy eyes, these burning hands portended.

Great heavens! if she were to be struck down now! at the very hour when all her future life was at stake; when everything was to be done by her own strength, her own pluck, her own cool command of nerve and of brain! She was without physical fear. No thought of death or sickness softened her, either for herself or others. It was the misfortune of being ill at this particular time that overcame her; and with a despe-

rate moral effort she said to herself, after the servant had gone away, "I will *not* be ill yet. For a day, at least, I will keep up and see him, and say what I have to say. It can't come on; no fever ever comes on in an hour. I remember Rose before her brain fever, and she was dull and hot, like this, all one day, and then delirious at night. I don't care what I am at night if I can keep up, and see Bryanstone once more to-day. Who knows? He'll see my illness, at least, isn't acted, and it may move him. I won't rouge, I think," she went on, looking at her haggard self in the glass. "He shall see me in all my ghastliness, and then if I am taken worse, and brought here by the women, they shan't be able to say I paint, at all events."

She opened Stretton's note: a formal announcement of his departure, that all the world might have read; then got a sheet of note-paper, and wrote a few lines in pencil, asking Bryanstone to be in Miss Surtees' morning-room at eleven, as she had a question on business to ask him. This she put into an envelope, and committed to the charge of the servant who brought her tea, with

the request that she would contrive to meet Mr. Bryanstone on his way from the breakfast-table, and give it, unseen, into his own hands. A risk, certainly ; but like all intriguants, imperial or otherwise, Honoria Forrester continually found herself with no other choice than that of trusting some one : and, as a rule, she knew the chances were in favour of her not being betrayed. Bestow confidence unasked on any human being, kaiser or housemaid, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you won't find yourself sold ; provided, of course, that the person you trust has no selfish interest either way in the matter.

The girl faithfully gave the note to Bryanstone as he was on his way to the stables, and at eleven o'clock punctually, he entered the little study where Miss Forrester had given him the appointment, and where already she was waiting for him.

At sight of her he positively started. She was more than pale, she was ashen, save where one scarlet spot burned on her left cheek ; and her dress—a white morning wrapper, unrelieved by any admixture of colour—heightened, as she

intended it should do, the death-like hue of her complexion.

“I hope you’ll forgive me for this,” she cried, rising for an instant, then sinking back on the sofa where she was seated. “But I’ve some important business to do to-day, and feel so ill I hardly know how to get through it. Will you help me with your advice?”

Of course he would; and of course he came and seated himself by her side. Tears, that soften so many men, made Bryanstone turn to adamant; but the desperate pallor of this woman’s face did touch him acutely. He had never been alone with her since that fatal night at Laura Hamilton’s door, and it began to dawn upon him that he was behaving badly. If he didn’t mean to marry her, there was certainly no necessity for him to behave to her like a brute. She loved him, it was pretty certain; or what did that feverish hand, that face of marble portend? For how could he guess that she had stood drenched to the skin in her thin ball-dress at midnight, and that the first ague-chill of fever was upon her?

"I will do any kind of business you ask me, Miss Forrester, but first I should like to do something for your health. Do you know that you are looking fearfully ill to-day?"

"Oh, not worse than I have often done lately," she answered, with a trembling attempt at a smile. "I get quite flushed and well by night. It's the beginning of each day that is such cruel, hard work for me. However, that's not what I asked you here to speak about." She interrupted herself, hurriedly. "Mr. Bryanstone, I want you to tell me the safest way of paying over money to—to—why should I hesitate? to an unhappy man without honesty or principle, whom I want to get out of the country. I will be plainer still—to the man you saw last night, Mr. Stretton."

"Mr. Stretton!" repeated Bryanstone. "The man who you said was ——"

"I know, I know," Honoria interrupted. "What would you have me say? I never meant to deceive you, but before all those people what could I do but try to explain away his appearance? He *is* of good family; he is a man

of education. In that I told no positive untruth. But, oh, Mr. Bryanstone, when I tell you that that man is my own first cousin ; that that man was the means of breaking my poor father's heart ; can't you imagine all I felt at seeing him unexpectedly yesterday ?—all the old suffering, all the old shame."

She broke down for a minute or two ; then finding that Bryanstone remained undemonstrative, rallied her nerves, and without heroics, laid before him a short sketch of Stretton's career. A rapid, succinct sketch, really marvellously life-like, and well put together, when you consider that there was not one syllable of truth in it from beginning to end. Also that it was only by supreme effort she could bring her already fast-turning brain to concentrate its thoughts at all.

Bryanstone heard her throughout ; heard how, as a forlorn orphan child, Stretton had been received under the roof of his uncle, Honoria's father. How, when he was put out into the world, he sunk from one misdeed to another, until at length he made away with some money

entrusted to him by an employer, and broke the old man's heart. How Honoria, never ceasing to look on the cousin and companion of her childhood with affection, had even out of her scanty means as a governess, contributed to his support. Finally, how, now returning from Australia, whither his relations had subscribed to send him, he had tracked her, and followed her into Norfolk.

"And once more I have promised to help him," she finished. "He says that a hundred pounds will set him up in America, and I have promised to lend it—I might just as well say to give it—him, and also to pay his passage to New York. The conditions I made were, that he should leave England in two days, and only receive the money when his passage is taken; and what I want to ask is this—how must I get my money out of the funds, and can I depend on an agent to pay it to him at the last moment? He is to sail from Liverpool on the

... was a master-stroke in every way. Of
... now that she had told him so much of

down, and turned away from him—"I don't know how Mr. Lumley would like it." She clenched her hands together nervously.

"Hang Lumley!" cried Bryanstone, hotly. "I beg your pardon a thousand times, Miss Forrester; but what has Lumley got to do with my helping you in your business, and taking as much trouble as possible out of your hands?"

"I am afraid Mr. Lumley has something to do in every concern or business of mine," she answered; "or, at all events, that he thinks so."

"Oh, I was not aware of it. I thought," said Bryanstone, with the coldness of ice, "that the last time I saw you, you said all that was at an end. Doubtless you have quite forgotten the time I allude to, Miss Forrester—the night before I went abroad with De Bassompierre? I beg your pardon for recalling it."

"I have not forgotten it, Mr. Bryanstone. But it was a moment of madness, as you know."

He was silent, and she looked suddenly, piteously into his face. "It was a moment of madness. You know it, do you not?"

“Madness or not,” said Bryanstone, quickly, “I know that it was a moment worth a good many years of ordinary life! Miss Forrester, do you wish me to say more?” And as he spoke her eyes sank under his gaze; and ill though she was, the blood leapt up crimson into her face.


“No—No—” she stammered, almost in a whisper. “I don’t wish you to say more. You have spoken to me once already like this, and I can’t—I dare not listen to you. I belong to Farnham Lumley, Mr. Bryanstone! I know it. I feel it. When I wake, every morning, that horrible knowledge sickens me from the very thought of having to live out another day. He has done everything for me. He befriended me, loaded me with gifts, introduced me to the world in an honourable position, and now—great God! now I am utterly in his power, and he knows it. Read this.”

She drew forth a letter from her pocket, and as she gave it to him her hand lightly touched Bryanstone’s. It had been burning a minute before; now it was ice-cold, and clammy, like

the hand of a corpse. "Read this," she repeated, "and tell me how I can dream of escape—how I can for a moment listen to words of kindness, of pity even, from you."

The letter was signed "Farnham Lumley," and ran thus :

"MY DEAR HONORIA,—I have just heard that you are going with the Haighs, to stay with the Surtees, in Norfolk. Are you aware that Bryanstone is now there? If not, mind, I inform you of it, and I also positively forbid you if you have not already started, from putting yourself in any position where you are likely to meet him. As I have often told you, I believe in none of your charming sex. I don't believe in you ; and I will not have men couple your name again with his, as they did after that confounded supper-party, when you made such open love to him under my very eyes. You seem to forget, I think, from the tone of your last letter, the position in which we stand to each other. When I met you, after Bryanstone's sister had kicked you into the streets, I took a fancy to you, and brought you forward, and made a lady of you,




remember ; and you're not going to turn round now with any of your cursed ingratitude, and talk about your 'wretched spirits,' and 'not feeling sure of your own heart,' and such bosh ! Your heart, if you have one, I don't care for ; but *you* I most definitely mean to have. A word of mine, if I chose, would be enough to make the friends I have given you cast you off. For at whose recommendation, but mine, did they first take you up—at whose recommendation have you been living among the best people in England, ever since you left Mrs. Hamilton ? And if you show any signs of being false to your promise, that word shall be spoken. I have behaved honourably to you from the first. You took my presents. You made me get you on in London under the express understanding that I should marry you, when my wife dies, and I mean to hold you to it. I saw her doctor the day before yesterday, and he told me nothing but a miracle can prolong her life till winter. Write to me at once—a warmer letter than the last—and believe me, my dear Honoria, your fond, but not your foolish, slave, "FARNHAM LUMLEY."

"It's a nice love-letter, Mr. Bryanstone," said Honoria, bitterly, as he finished it; "and I am right, am I not? Mr. Lumley has me safe. After all he has done, I could not give him up now."

"You could do all you chose, Miss Forrester," answered Bryanstone as he put the letter back into her passive hand. "The brutal cruelty of such a letter as this tells you pretty clearly the kind of happiness you'll have to look forward to as Farnham Lumley's wife."

"I know it. I know it only too well!" she cried, with a stifled sob. "But what is my alternative? If I don't marry him what will people think of me, as he says? It is different for girls in your rank of life, Mr. Bryanstone. My character is my bread, and I must—yes, I must—be true to this man. Whatever his faults are, he offers me protection and a home. If—if—I had never known you I believe I might have been happy with him."

She rose and staggered a step or two forwards, then rested her arm heavily on the table, and looked back to him.



“Will you—support—me a moment?” she gasped. “I am faint.”

And then the hue of death indeed gained over her face. Her head dropped, and in another moment Bryanstone held her, fainting and speechless, in his arms.

Nature had done for her that in which all art would have failed. He knew that this was no acting; that these livid lips for once did not lie; that no deception lay beneath the grasp of those clammy rigid hands. And tenderly as any man must feel towards any helpless woman who loves him, he held her and looked into her face.

At this moment the library door opened, and Miss Surtees, closely followed by the Haighs, mother and daughter, entered the room. Miss Surtees’ stony face demanded a dozen explanations on the spot; and all Bryanstone’s chivalrous nature was aroused for Honoria’s sake.

“You have come opportunely, Miss Surtees,” he said, looking quietly into her outraged face. “Miss Forrester, as you see, is fainting, and requires air.”

Then, as Miss Surtees swept by him to open

the window, he added, in a lower tone, "I ought to tell you how it is you find me in such a position, only that this is not a moment to enter into explanations."

In the very valley of death though Honoria already was, her brain noted and registered those words. Bryanstone was won!

They succeeded after a long time in rallying her from her swoon; but when they had done so she could not stand. Before night the doctor from the nearest town pronounced Miss Forrester to be sickening with typhus, and all the visitors, mortally afraid of contagion, were already preparing to leave The Place. By morning of the next day she was delirious.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TURNING-POINT OF MORE LIVES THAN ONE.

“From ten till midnight—from ten till midnight.”

Would the parched lips never give over the reiteration of those four words? Nelly Bertram looked at her as she lay there, tossing and moaning in her delirium—looked at her, the one thing on earth that the girl believed to stand between her and what she desired; and to her own heart she said, “Let her die! It is well so. What good is there in her life? Let her die, and Bryanstone will return to his first faith—to the faith that was never shaken till her fatal beauty stepped between us, and led him away from me. Let her die! These things are in God’s hands.”

“From ten till midnight—from ten till mid-

night. Why did you ever come back?—why did you ever come back? There, take the money, and stay away. 'Tis a far place, Australia—a far place—and none there knows you or me. What, come back?—come back so soon? I gave you all I had; you know it—all I had—and—water, water! My mouth is on fire. Why do you all rise up against me so? Stretton—Bernardin—St. Georges. From ten till midnight—from ten till midnight!”

Miss Bertram gave her water, smoothed her pillow, held cold wet cloths upon her burning head; then, when Honoria Forrester had comparatively calmed—had sunk, not into sleep, but into a state less wildly feverish than she had known for days past, she stole away to the open window, and, the broad western light having now faded, drew aside the curtain, and sat down to cool her own jaded senses with the soft purity of the evening air.

She needed calm, she needed purity, she needed refreshment. Any wearied attendant in a sick room must need them physically; but Miss Bertram knew—knew with what bitter

self-loathing that she needed them for her brain, for her heart. Few human-creatures at seventeen know so much of themselves as not to be shocked when circumstances chance abruptly to reveal to them their own capabilities. It is later in life that no revelation of our own hearts can ever, by possibility, surprise us ; and Nelly's life, as yet, had been an exceptionally quiet and honest one. Till four weeks ago, she had simply never known a human passion stronger than the common tempers and gluttonies of childhood. Having never been tempted by what, to her, was temptation, she had never fallen ; and now, great Heavens ! what a tumult of evil had been stirring in her breast during all this foregone day ! She knew that she had wished the helpless woman whom she was tending, to die ; had watched her with cruel eyes as she lay there, fever-struck, fearfully lovely in her unconscious, graceful beauty ; had listened greedily to every word her parched mouth let fall ; had sworn to herself that if the patient lived she would make the utmost of whatever clue to her past life her own unwitting lips had afforded. Would use

them as she felt they *could* be used to withhold Honoria from the man who had been won away by that false fair face, from herself.

And now Nelly looked out upon the night—the golden summer night—with one or two great stars already risen above the woods, and with the faint odours from the corn-fields stealing in and mingling with the sweets of garden flowers; and she remembered how short a time it was since she used to play among the corn-fields of a summer's evening, and how good her life had been then, and how miserable it was now that she was a woman, and had learnt to love and to hate! And then the childish heart swelled over, and Nelly bowed her face down in her hands, and wept—the first tears that she had shed since Miss Forrester's illness.

No woman of five-and-twenty would have done this. She might have cried, of course, from want of sleep, or from the mere bodily necessity of periodical tear-shedding which exists in many persons; but having once felt all that Nelly had done that day, she would not have been softened into remorse by the first sight of

the evening star or the smell of a few flowers coming in through the open window. Youth, youth only, is the season of abrupt transitions, of unexpected revulsions of feeling (because in youth 'tis all feeling that sways us, not reason—which of course is a much slower, though more meritorious process). And Nelly was very young; and hatred, and love, and all mere raw materials of life and of passion were abundant within her. And so the purity and the beauty of the night cried out to her aloud: the fierce impulses of five minutes before became suddenly as scarlet sins in her sight, and she wept.

A few minutes later, Bryanstone's voice called to her softly from beneath the window to go and walk with him awhile in the garden; and finding the patient still quietly at rest, Miss Bertram gave her over to the charge of one of the women-servants, who, now that the danger was lessening, began occasionally to come near the sick room, and stole quietly down the staircase of the silent, deserted house to meet him.

It was the fairest hour of the twenty-four. The garish light of day had faded newly from

the heavens, and while all the silence, all the voluptuousness, of night was upon the earth, night herself was still afar. Bees hummed still among the closing garden flowers : no moon was out as yet upon the sunless sky.

“Day is gone, like my hope ; but night, like my despair, hovers around, felt, but as yet unseen,” thought poor little Nelly, sentimentally, as she stood a moment at the open hall-door and looked out upon that fair and peaceful evening. And then she went out, with her miserable weight of misery, into the golden, delicious air, and passively took Bryanstone’s arm—for he was waiting kindly for her just outside—and had to reply, as best she might, to his comments on her whitened cheeks and heavy eyes, and evident need of rest.

He chose the path to the spot which, since she was a child, Nelly had liked best in all the grounds of Lowick Place. A walk at the south side of the fruit garden, hid away by an avenue of sycamores from sight of the house, and with only a sunk holly fence dividing it in

front from a wide-spreading vista of corn-fields and an horizon of blue moor beyond.

Nature was as remorseless as ever, Nelly felt. The yellow fields lay just as calm in their shorn beauty, the far horizon faded into heaven with just as soft a kiss as though Mr. Bryanstone had been going to confess his love for her ; as though Honoria Forrester was not in the world. No discord in sound, no discord in colour in all that fair expanse. The earth, in the rich fullness of her autumn beauty, satisfied, crowned with plenteousness, at rest ; and only one foolish human heart rebelling against the untimely storm that had laid its summer low ! Nothing more.

“This cool air will do you good, Nelly,” said Bryanstone, “but you really look too tired for much walking. Let me find a place for you to rest.” And he took her to a low stone-bench at one end of the walk, spread out the rug that he had thoughtfully brought with him for her use, then took his own place beside her, and extended an arm for her support.

“I don’t want holding,” remarked Nelly,

drawing herself petulantly away. "I am neither tired nor ill, whatever I may look."

Bryanstone took his arm away in a moment.

"Nelly," he said, after a minute or two, "shall I tell you what I think of you?"

She looked at him, passionate tears ready to start into her eyes.

"I think you the noblest little girl living. It will do me good, it will make me think better of all women for the future, having known you."

She answered that he must have had a very poor experience of women hitherto if anything in her character could strike him as so excellent.

"I've had a very uniform set of experiences," said Bryanstone, gravely. "My mother was a woman of the world. My sister is a woman of the world. The different women I've thought myself in love with have been women of the world. Save one exception, of which it doesn't matter to speak, I never knew any one in the least fresh or honest till I met you. Years ago I remember seeing a great artist," he went on

with a half-smile, for indeed he considered himself now, as at all times, to be addressing a child in Nelly, "do the kind of character beautifully in the *Somnambula*, but you're the only little country girl I ever knew anything about, off the stage. Nelly, how happy you'll make some one when grown up to be a woman. Probably I shan't even know the name of your husband, but some day, five or six years hence, and when I am leading—God know what sort of life! it will come upon me like an actual pleasure to think Nelly Bertram is a woman now, and is making some man happier than I am. I shall think that, not exactly with envy, but with a kind of jealousy nevertheless, Miss Nelly!"

And Bryanstone took her cold hand in his own, and pressed it kindly.

"I don't ever mean to marry at all," said Nelly, snatching her hand away from him. "I wish nothing except that I had never been born, or that I could die now. What good is my life to any one?"

"What good is anyone's life?" answered Bryanstone. "Mine, I can answer for it, has

never been of the slightest use to anyone—myself included—from the day I first entered upon its possession till now.”

“Your life is what you choose to make it!” cried Nelly, impetuously. “You are in love with Miss Forrester, Sir, as you perfectly well know, and you are going to marry her!”

“Miss Forrester is much more near death than marriage just at present,” said Bryanstone, but he turned his face away a little; “and even if things were as you say, Miss Nelly, I don’t see that it would make my life of any particular worth.”

A woman of the world would have known instantly that Bryanstone was free still. But Nelly heard, believed, reasoned through her fears alone. “Your life will be what you choose to make it. It won’t have been spoilt and made null for you by the hand of another person.” Then her voice choked.

Bryanstone looked at the girl suddenly; and felt to her as he had certainly not felt before till this moment. She was not pretty, but in the blue eyes, half tears

half fire, turned full to his, Bryanstone was sensible of a charm in Nelly Bertram such as he never remembered having discerned in any other woman—no, not even in the soft pink-and-white face of his first dead love. Miss Forrester's attractions could be plainly labelled: red lips, fine bust, sleepy eyes; the trained *allures* of a finished coquette of five-and-twenty; and every woman he had pretended to himself to love of late years had owed their influence, such as it was, over him to the same kind of means alone. His first love had been a dream, a hunger of the imagination, a young man's fancy embodying itself in the first simple girl he chanced to meet. Of gaining a woman's mind, and heart, and soul he really knew nothing (how many women do you meet who possess mind, and heart, and soul?); and the troubled, passionate look of Nelly Bertram's eyes smote him strangely.

"Nelly, do you think you'll care a bit about me when I go away?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

She was silent.

"If Miss Forrester recovers—when she re-

covers, rather, and when she and I and all of us are well apart, do you think you'll remember me a little sometimes? Nelly, child, if things had been ordered differently—I mean if you were a grown-up woman and I had met you sooner—how differently the lives of all of us might have turned out.”

And, whether she willed it or not, Bryanstone came nearer, and half put his arm round Nelly's waist.

It was a moment of fierce temptation to her: the fiercer because she had been brought up to recognise so very few of our conventional codes of honour. She believed, thoroughly, that he was engaged to marry Miss Forrester; and yet, instinctively, she felt that at this moment it might be possible for her, poor and plain and charmless as she was, to step in and divide them. She felt that this was the moment, if ever, in which Bryanstone could be won. Without actually having reasoned it out, she knew that his love for Honoria Forrester was not an adamant love. A breath of what she had witnessed, a breath of that midnight interview, of the words which

in Miss Forrester's delirium had never ceased to pour from her lips, and Bryanstone, in all human probability, would stand free of the entanglement. He might have received as truth whatever garbled accounts of her relations towards Stretton, Miss Forrester had thought fit to give him. But what man's fiercest misgivings would not be roused by such details as it was in her own power to give—above all, by the allusions to himself which Miss Forrester and her companion had so freely made? All this came like lightning across Nelly's mind : and Bryanstone's arm was around her, Bryanstone's breath on her cheek ! And she had been brought up with no more exalted or more complex moral code than such humdrum bits of morality as her copy-book texts or Mrs. Trimmer's Scripture questions afforded—neither of which authorities, you may be sure, even if she had thought of them, would have saved her more than any trite authorities ever can save any of us on occasion.

But the sole safeguard against real, not conventional, dishonour : the regal gift of a generous

nature, was Nelly's. She loved Bryanstone to excess. She loved life. She loved herself. She bled for her own pain. But one word against the rival who lay, helpless and fever-struck, and in her power, it was not in her to speak.

"I shall always remember you kindly, Mr. Bryanstone. Always—always—and would do anything for you, or—or for her, if you marry her. Only don't ask me to stay here much longer, please. Miss Forrester is better. Doctor Turner told me if she quieted towards night he would have no fear of her by to-morrow. She is quiet, she is in a deep sleep now, and by to-morrow evening one of the servants can nurse her as well as I could. I don't want to say any more—but, somehow, I could not bear to be here as Honoria Forrester recovers."

She did not resent it this time when Bryanstone took her hand, and held and kept it. She took his arm and walked very calmly with him to the house. And only when she was alone by Miss Forrester's side did the thought come upon her fully that with her own right hand, of her

own free-will, she had just closed and blotted what might have been the first and fairest page of her life !

Then the inexorable punishment of all human creatures who are at once liable to passion and to reason overcame her.

Had she been right ? Was this indeed honour or Quixotism ? Had she fulfilled her duty even to Bryanstone in withholding from him her knowledge ?

And still while Nelly tortured herself with doubt, Honoria Forrester slept on the calm, refreshing sleep that was to restore her to health ; bring her, as the forebodings of Miss Bertram's heart too truly prophesied, to Henry Bryanstone's arms.

CHAPTER VII.

“YOU HAVE COME AT LAST!”

ON the following morning Miss Forrester was pronounced out of danger: two days later her iron constitution was already fast bringing her on towards recovery.

“She rallies like a child, my dear sir,” the pompous little doctor said, as he rubbed his hands, and announced the good news to Sir Harry. “A marvellous constitution — obeys treatment like an infant. Fear of a relapse? Not any, sir, not any: My patients seldom do relapse. At the end of a fortnight, if we go on as we do now, Miss Forrester will be in the air again.”

“And I can go away at once,” thought Miss Bertram, who was passively listening to the verdict. “No need of my nursing, no fear of

her getting strong, when she has Henry Bryanstone to recover for."

She went back into the sick room and found Miss Forrester for the first time since her illness disposed to talk.

"Have I been ill long, Miss Bertram? Mr. Turner said something about 'weeks' just now. Have I been ill all that time?"

"You have been ill exactly three weeks," answered Nelly. "Yesterday three weeks I came to The Place."

"And you have nursed me through it all?"

"I have. I heard the other women had gone away afraid, and as you are a friend of Mr. Bryanstone's, I was glad to please him by looking after you. Don't thank me, please." And she crossed over the room, and, seating herself by the open window, leant out her tired, white face to the refreshing morning air.


"There is a genuine nature!" thought Honoria, looking after her. "None of your Lettys and Lauras! This woman loves Bryanstone, and has nursed me for his sake, and tells me so. I swear I'll never injure her while I live, if I

can possibly help it. Miss Bertram," aloud, "if you won't let me thank you, you must let me be grateful to you. I am very grateful. Would you mind answering a question I've got to ask?" she went on after a minute, and while Nelly continued cold and silent. "A question about myself, and no one else?"

"If I can, I will answer it. Stay, I'll come closer to you. You're not strong enough to exert yourself by talking yet."

Miss Bertram came and sat in the chair where she had watched through so many an hour of fever and delirium, and then—but not without hesitation, the patient brought out her question. Had she been delirious? had she raved in her delirium? and what—here she faltered most—had been the things of which she had talked.

"I think you talked of everything under the sun," said Nelly, with a little bitter laugh. "Sometimes you were waiting for a bell to ring or a voice to call you. Sometimes you were crowned with flowers. Sometimes you were being hissed by a thousand voices at once—and whenever you talked like this it was in French



Then came German, of which I only knew enough to tell it was about cards, most of it. Then back to French ; then English. Some one called Lumley, whoever that may be, and his letters, and Mr. Bryanstone—and then Anthony Stretton. More about him than anyone else though, of course.”

“Why, ‘of course,’ Miss Bertram?”

“Because you know you saw him last before your illness, did you not?”

“Oh, yes. I had forgotten. And what nonsense did I say of Anthony Stretton?” Miss Forrester tried to smile.

“You talked no nonsense at all. Even when you were wildest your words had sense in them. What you repeated oftenest concerning Mr. Stretton were his own words, ‘from ten till midnight—from ten till midnight.’ One day you said that, I should think, for two hours without intermission.”

“How painful for you to listen to! But—but—what do you mean by saying they were his own words? Why, I don’t even know what they mean.”


Nelly was silent.

“Don’t be afraid of speaking,” said Honoria. “I shall have no relapse. I’m no fool to get agitated and throw myself back. What do you mean by saying ‘from ten till midnight’ were Mr. Stretton’s own words?”

“Simply what I do say,” answered the girl, curtly. “If you force me to speak I must speak. The night you opened your window to that man, and stood there drenched in the storm, I listened to you all the time. I thought you were plotting against Mr. Bryanstone, and I heard every word you said.”

“And have repeated it to him since?”

“Miss Forrester! But you don’t know what an offence your question is to me!” Nelly interrupted herself. “How should you know whether I am likely to do such a thing or not? No, I have told him nothing. I listened because I thought—I took it, without reason, into my head—that some injury was going to be done him. If there had, you would have seen whether I could speak or not. When I found what your intentions were I resolved to be silent.



I wouldn't have seen Mr. Bryanstone hurt ; but he may marry whom he pleases. I will not injure you with him ? ” cried the poor child, with trembling lips.

Miss Forrester was very nearly touched. The best precepts of morality, the holiest truths of religion, were powerless, at all times, to stir this pagan heart. But genuine sudden outbreaks of nature like Nelly's (or, as you may remember, like the solitary little nurse-tender's about her sailor boy) did move her, sometimes, into a vague consciousness of that utter want in her own dead heart that made her what she was. This was love ! This was honour ! This was self-sacrifice ! This was truth. All the things that the companionship of women of the world, like Letty, had confirmed her in scoffing at.

“ You like Mr. Bryanstone,” she faltered, almost without knowing what she said. “ Miss Bertram, I am sorry—— ”

“ Please don't pity me ! ” cried Nelly. “ You have nothing to be sorry for. Mr. Bryanstone is perfectly free to marry any one he chooses. I am only a spectator of it all. What have

plain women like me to do with love or marriage ? ”

“ You speak of my engagement to him openly,” said Honoria ; who naturally had only a vague idea of the extent to which Bryanstone had compromised himself. “ Surely you have not mentioned it to any one yet ? ”

“ I mentioned it to Mr. Bryanstone himself only an evening ago,” Nelly answered, “ and he did not deny it. Why should he ? All the rest of the house knows it. Sir Harry told me the day I came that Mr. Bryanstone had said something of the kind to his daughter. Surely you, Miss Forrester, don’t desire that it should be kept quiet.”

“ No, no,” murmured Honoria. “ I only wished to know if it was openly spoken about. I have somewhat lost my memory in my illness, I think.”

And she leant back on her pillow, and mused long and silently over the strange chance that, as it seemed, had thrown victory into her hands. “ Lumley’s letter was cleverly planned,” she thought. “ I take every credit to myself for the

idea" (for in this, as in everything else, Lumley had been but the copyist, the tool of the superior brain); "but it alone would not have succeeded. I remember it all now, and there was no more said of marriage than there was that night in the Haymarket, until I turned sick, and those women found me in his arms. Then what fine feeling made him speak, I wonder? In what miraculous manner did honour, as such men call it, suddenly take its place on the scene? That matters little. If what the girl says is true, I have won. Now my game must be to bring on all the rest quickly. To give no time for those women or the brother to interfere. If I know him, he will be glad to be spared congratulations, and I—I will be generous, and forego settlements!"

But her first interview with Bryanstone showed Miss Forrester how entirely she was reckoning without her host in these fond speculations; how entirely Nelly had mistaken her own jealous misgivings for truths in speaking of the engagement as an acknowledged one!

Bryanstone had not taken refuge in flight,

certainly, as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done: he had remained near her when all the other inmates of the house left her to the mercy of strangers in her hour of need. But his brain was just as cool; his intention of marrying her or any other woman just as distant as ever. And on the first day, when she was able to come down-stairs—Nelly had gone back to the Parsonage, and she and Bryaustone were alone—he let this fact be known, in terms impossible even for Miss Forrester to mistake.

“You must have found it very stupid here!” she remarked, looking up from the sofa where they had placed her—very weak and white she looked—by the open drawing-room window. “And I have a guilty feeling that you have undergone these three weeks’ martyrdom on my account.”

“It hasn’t been martyrdom at all,” said Bryaustone, in his frank way. “I spend a month of every year in this house, and have passed my time more pleasantly with old Sir Harry than I do generally, with the house full of men and women, who bore me. For the rest—well, I

think, Miss Forrester, I ought to have a guilty feeling towards you. Do you remember—I dare say you don't, though—the day you were taken ill?"

"Yes;" and Honoria cast her eyes down; "she remembered that day well."

"Well, Miss Surtees came in at the very moment when you had fainted, and—and—" delicate manipulation of truth was not Bryanstone's forte—"seeing that she thought the position rather strong, I toned it down for her, you understand, with something about that not being the moment for explanations. If they come down upon you with congratulations some day, you will know what it all means, and give your own answer. You have refused me; jilted me; anything you like! Now, are you very angry? I have told you the whole delinquency, openly."

"Angry? No." murmured Honoria; but her heart felt ready to burst with mortification; and the great tears rose sullenly in her eyes. "I am not likely to be put in the way of congratulations," she went on. "I had a letter

from Miss Surtees this morning, telling me that 'as the doctor pronounced me convalescent, she had no doubt I shall be able to leave Lowick at once.' The house will want thorough purification," she added; "fresh papering and white-washing, doubtless, before any of them can trust themselves back to the risk of contagion! I'm not very strong for travelling, but I suppose . . . I suppose I must go?" And she raised her handkerchief with a trembling hand, and passed it across her face.

Bryanstone expressed his opinion that she ought not to think of moving for another week at least: but he asked no question as to where she was going. Three weeks' musing in a lonely country-house had quite restored him to his senses concerning Miss Forrester, and the desperate danger he had already so nearly run, on more than one occasion, in flirting with her.

"I am afraid I shall not see you for some time, Miss Forrester. I am going over to Norway next week, and later in the autumn Fairfax wants me to go down to Scotland with him."

"Do you think you will be in London in the

winter, Mr. Bryanstone? As I have told you before, everything in my future life depends upon Mr. Lumley. When he is free I suppose I shall become his wife at once. God knows, I have no friends whose opinion I need consult!” she added, bitterly. “It is customary, doubtless, for a man to wait a twelvemonth after his wife’s death before marrying again. But what does custom matter to me? Who is there to care whether I am praised or blamed in anything I do?”

Mr. Bryanstone walked away to the window, and began a stedfast inspection of the distant moor; hazy and aërial-tinted in the tremulous heat of the early September evening.

Miss Forrester looked at him with feelings in which positive hate was fast becoming pre-eminent.

“Gredin d’Anglais!” she muttered, between her set teeth; thinking in French, as she always did when she was really moved. “And a day or two ago I almost was in love with him, and sentimentalized about that little white-faced fool who deceived him! If I don’t marry you, I’ll be revenged on you some other way, that at

least I may swear ! ” Then, aloud : “ But wherever I may meet you, Mr. Bryanstone, I hope we shall be friends. Perhaps I may see you again before you leave England. I must go myself to London for a day or two, I think.”

Bryanstone answered that he should only be in town two nights. He had written yesterday to bid them have the house ready for him ; but would not know whether he might go there till to-morrow morning. His housekeeper had strong opinions as to putting him in his proper place, and very likely would tell him to go to an hotel. “ That is, if she’s in London herself,” he added. “ My own conviction is that they shut the house up, and go to the sea at this time of the year.”

“ And —and when do you leave this, then ? ” she asked, with quivering lips.

“ To-morrow, Miss Forrester. I have really only waited on from day to day until I could say good-by to you. To-morrow night I shall be in London.”

The entrance of old Sir Harry here put an abrupt stop to the conversation, and at an early

hour Miss Forrester rose up and wished them both good-night.

"Good-by, rather," she said, as she gave her hand to Bryanstone. "I don't suppose I shall see you again."

"Well, I am afraid not," he answered; "I shall start, most likely, by the mail train at ten. Good-by, Miss Forrester; when we meet next, I shall hope to see you perfectly strong again."

She gave no answer, save a deep, suppressed sigh, and as Bryanstone opened the door, and saw her walk feebly through the hall, it was without any feeling of exultation that he said to himself, "I am free." A woman never gains so much in a man's regard as when, without tears, without hysterical reproach of any kind, she accepts his rejection and lets him go!

Honorina Forrester knew this well; and when she turned, before leaving the hall, and looked at him, something in Bryanstone's softened face told her that her last move had been the right one. She stood a moment irresolute; then smiled, with a faint and trembling smile, and passed away quickly, as if to hide her agitation from his sight.

He left Lowick next morning, having received a gracious permission to make use for one night of his own house ; and by five in the afternoon, was philosophizing, not greatly out of spirits, upon the cheerful aspect of the London streets in September, and his chance of finding a solitary man in the whole broiling desert to eat a dinner and spend his evening with him.

By extraordinary chance the faces of three men he knew, passing, like himself, for a day through deserted Babylon, greeted him at Arthur's ; and with an infatuation that could only be expected from men looking out at a London street with the thermometer at eighty-five, some one proposed after dinner that they should go round, as a matter of curiosity, and see what was being done at the theatre. They sat out half of some popular adaptation of innocent bigamy, at the Adelphi ; and then, at Bryanstone's suggestion, adjourned for a little hazard to Pratt's, where just as many men seemed to be crowded round the tables, as though the season were at its full. Grilled bones and excessive champagne were the natural conclusion of a night spent, as

one of them observed, after the manner of very juvenile ensigns come up from camp to see life ; and the dim September morning was already breaking overhead when, with his pocket by no means heavier, and his head unequivocally lighter for the night's work, Henry Bryanstone found himself dismounting from a hansom before the door of his own house in Piccadilly.

He had paid and dismissed the cabman, and was wildly searching through all his pockets, as men at such times do search for their latch-keys, when an apparition—indeed it seemed to him two, if not three apparitions — of a woman's figure suddenly emerged from a cab that was standing four or five doors off, and glided through the uncertain light to his side. It—no, *she*—I will not appeal one instant to your sense of the supernatural—laid a hand, damp and cold as a tombstone, upon his, and looked up with a wan smile to his face.

“You are here, sir,” she stammered, with lips that were blue and deathly after that long night's vigil. “You have come at last !”

“Honorias !” exclaimed Bryanstone, who could

scarcely have been more aghast with surprise had a legitimate ghost laid its hand on his. "You here, at this hour?"

"I followed you up from the country, and called at your house, and they said you would most likely be back early, and so I kept the cab, and waited. I did not know what else to do, and I wanted to pay you back something I forgot in my illness—the money you paid Anthony Stretton. Here is a cheque for it, if you will please see whether I've written it right." And with her left hand she drew out a piece of paper from her dress, leaning heavily against the area-rails, as if to steady herself from falling, while she did so.

Bryanstone put the paper, mechanically, in his pocket, without looking at it; and then he took both of Miss Forrester's hands in his.

"Do you know that this will be your death?" he asked her. "Why, you're not fit to be out at all, and here you've been—God knows how many hours in the night air! It's a cursed shame! Those women have not behaved humanly to you!" He was only half sober, as Honoria

quickly saw. "And you shall come in with me, by G—! you shall, my poor child! To turn you out upon the cold streets this way!"

"No, no, Mr. Bryanstone!" she cried, shrinking away. "I'll go back now. I'll never trouble you again. It was the thought of your saying good-by so coldly that made me miserable, and then I said to myself I *must* see your face once more, if I died for seeing it; and I got here as well as I could, and waited. And now I've seen you; and I'll go." In proof of which determination, she caught hold heavily of his arm and laid her ghastly white face against his shoulder.

Cabby, who was of course a spectator of the touching scene, advanced at this moment, and asked if he should ring the house up? He'd been there since nine o'clock, and in course the lady was chilly, which indeed he was himself, "although the night being 'ot ——"

"Go to blazes!" interrupted Bryanstone, curtly. "We don't want you any more. What's your fare?"

"One pound, twelve-and-six, sir, if you please.

'Two-and-six an hour till midnight, and double afterwards, and——'

Bryanstone tossed him a couple of sovereigns, about the last he had. The cabman, with the fine knowledge of human nature ordinarily possessed by cabmen, saw that it was a case in which the parties were too far gone to demand any change; and—after forming inductive theories of his own as to the probable success of the young woman's plant—drove away.

They were alone in the most utter solitude in the world—London, at five o'clock of an autumn morning. Bryanstone, his head unsteady with wine, and feeling himself the protector, against a brutal world, of this deserted woman, who had risked her life, her honour, to see him. Honoria, chilled with agitation, undoubtedly, but not at all faint (she had eaten sandwiches and drank cherry-brandy at intervals throughout the night), and with her brain as cool and collected as the Duke's on the morning of Waterloo.

"Come in," he said, having at length discovered his latch-key in the pocket where he always kept it, and opened the door. "What are you

afraid of? There's no one here to say anything to you.”

“ And you'll promise never to think the worse of me for this afterwards? ” she answered, crossing the threshold, and turning her beautiful white face back to him.

“ Do you think me such a cad, that you need ask that? ” was his reply. And, coming close to her side, he led her into his own little sanctum on the ground-floor, where the early light was already stealing through the closed blinds, and gazed at her in a sort of exultation.

Bryanstone was habitually a singularly sober man ; and on the rare occasions when he drank too much, he drank a great deal too much. He had done so now.

“ I start for Folkestone at nine,” he remarked ; “ and you shall go too. I swear you shall. Oh, never mind your traps,” as she made a feint at demurring. “ You can get all you want when we're there.”

“ And—and—the ceremony? ” she murmured ; “ it must be a special licence, which is *so* expensive, Mr. Lumley told me once.”

“Curse Lumley ! what do we want him for ? Of course it must be a special, if you wish it—take us down to Folkestone in two hours, if you like.”

Many a better man than poor Bryanstone has lost his senses in wine ; and many a wiser one than Bryanstone at such times would see no material difference between a special train and a special licence, with a woman as beautiful and as clever as Honoria to confuse his ideas for him. That she had risked life and reputation to see him again ; that he was bound in honour to be her protector against the world ; these, lost though he was, were stronger feelings with him still than love, or even passion, for herself.

They were feelings far more sterling for her to work upon !

As his brain cleared, passion must have cooled ; but as his brain cleared, the sense of honour to her became stronger.

Before noon of the day that was then dawning, Miss Forrester was Henry Bryanstone’s wife.

PART VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUSPECTED!

It is a recognised axiom that early married happiness is a state not to be profaned by the pen of the novelist. Describe every detail of the courtship, count the orange-blossoms in the wreath ; record, if of a Tupperian cast of mind, all the aspirations for the future that a well-regulated bride and bridegroom ought to breathe upon their wedding-day. Then be silent, until a year and a day later you raise the veil, and disclose an infant heir smiling in his cradle, or a former husband hovering in dark disguise about the doomed couple's peace—according as the bent of your story may be domestic or sensational.

I only remember one English novel in which the author boldly followed his hero and heroine

to the Isle of Wight, and described them, four days after marriage, consuming enormous quantities of hot rolls and prawns for breakfast ; and many persons I know considered that novel to be the first sign of decadence, or Gallican tendency, in our national literature. Following a custom which we must accept as right, because it is a custom (although, to my mind, the honeymoon, not the wedding service, is the climax of every story—the turning-point of every life), we will pass over the first four months of Henry Bryanstone's marriage.

These four months had changed the golden year into fog and rain—an English autumn into an English winter. They had also reconciled Letitia Fairfax, not one whit to her brother's infatuated marriage, but to the fact that it was Christian, decent, worldly-wise for her to receive the bride. And in full family conclave it had at length been decided that Bryanstone, who had just returned to London from the continent, should be invited to introduce his wife at once to her new relations.

Letty and her husband, with one or two un-

important cousins, were staying with old Sir Hyde Bryanstone, at the family place in Somersetshire, when the ultimatum was decreed.

“Better tell Henry to bring her down here at once,” said Sir Hyde, “and I can act the père noble in a grand tableau of reconciliation among you all. If Henry is really married to her, as I am afraid there’s no doubt” [“Oh, Uncle Hyde!” cries Letty], “the best thing for you and Richard is to say ‘amen’ to the ceremony. As far as I am concerned, I’m perfectly indifferent on the subject,” added the old man, maliciously. “If Henry would not have married, I must; and at my age it’s only right I should be willing to concede the best privileges and blessings of life to the younger generation.”

Old Sir Hyde was, or is—for why use the past tense in speaking of a man whose face is still to be seen any day you like during April and May, at the window of Boodle’s?—one of the few human beings of whom Letty stood thoroughly in awe. All women stood in awe of him. His manner to them was so irreproachably polished, his disbelief in them so profound, his memory

respecting their actions so unerring! A grand inquisitor walking about among heretics, who knew their name to be written in the fatal book, could scarce have been treated with more flattering attention than was Sir Hyde Bryanstone, whenever he chose to show his imperturbable handsome old face in any London drawing-room. Women of all ages paid him court. He remembered domestic vicissitudes that occurred under the fourth George just as well as the scandal of yesterday. Young girls in their first season manœuvred and fought for old Sir Hyde's goodwill. A shrug of his shoulders was as damning to a new beauty as is a hiss from the *loge infernale* to a new prima donna. A word from him could commit a woman to old age who an hour before had had a dozen young men at her feet. The exactitude of his dates was what killed. He never said coarsely, "such a woman is growing old;" but, "in the spring of '56 such a woman first rouged." "At the Prussian ambassador's ball in '49 such another's teeth and hair first took the world by surprise." Nothing that he had once heard—and he heard every-

thing—did he ever forget, or become confused about, either in public or in private life ; indeed, in politics alone he was a kind of epitomized blue-book. In his recollection of faces he was like a prince of the blood. With one of his quick sidelong glances he could identify the features of any man or woman he had ever seen, often of those he had only known by sight in the street, and after the lapse of any number of years. No one ever knew him at fault in any case of identity ; and, unlike most *raconteurs*, no one ever remembered him to falsify, or even embellish.

“ Sir Hyde Bryanstone does not deny it,” was a sort of indorsement to any bill of attainder that might be issued for public circulation. “ Sir Hyde Bryanstone says it is so,” was tantamount to actual confiscation of whatever shred or remnant of reputation the unhappy attainted might yet possess.

Some one has called society a strong solution of all the best books. Sir Hyde was a strong solution of all the best scandal of the last fifty years. As Professor Owen could solve a mega-

therium from a tooth, or Agassiz the picture of a fish from a scale, a single word, a name, a date, was sufficient for Sir Hyde to pronounce with certainty upon any man's antecedents or possibilities. Bland and courteous of manner ; handsome, clever, rich : here was a man who seemed to have passed through life with no other object than that of becoming the unwritten record of every human frailty that he came across. It was his calling, simply. You had no more right to call him hard names for his lack of charity, than you would have in calling Field or Jonathan hard names for being good detectives. In a different grade of life he probably would have been a detective. With a taste for writing spiteful things, instead of saying them, he might have been the nineteenth century's Walpole. As it was, Sir Hyde Bryanstone was just a white-headed old country gentleman ; enormously courted and feared by the world generally ; without wife or child to trouble his peace ; and as to friends—well, with an old name, an old estate, and three or four thousand a-year to keep up the name and estate upon, I don't think any man,

Christian or Pagan, need go very far in search of these.

He had, as I said, neither wife nor child. "Most likely some woman jilted him in his youth," people commonly averred. But, failing any more than presumptive proofs of a love-scar, I should be inclined to think a man like Sir Hyde had never in fact felt the slightest inclination to marry. A horrible instinct of celibacy does run, like madness, in some families (among the male branches only, of course), and the Bryanstones were not entirely free of the taint. Out of three brothers, Henry Bryanstone's father alone had married. In the preceding generation there were records of two or more jovial old bachelors, brothers and cousins. And, as you have seen, Henry Bryanstone, save for one of the accidents to which all men are subject, would most probably have again carried out the family eccentricity.

Had he done so, the baronetcy and estate would, on his death, devolve upon a certain worthy person, named Augustus Bryanstone, who was in orders; consequently the father of many children; and an object of extreme dis-

taste to old Sir Hyde. Much, therefore, as he disapproved of marriage theoretically, and idiotic as he considered Henry for not having sought a woman with money, the fact of his having married at all was on the whole welcome to him, rather than otherwise.

“If Henry chose to marry neither a lady nor an heiress,” he remarked, in answer to one of poor Letty’s fierce outbreaks against Honoria—“if your brother chose to look out neither for rank nor for fortune, he has perhaps done well in taking a foreigner who has no relations to feed upon him. As she was a governess, the young woman will probably know how to bear the neglect that certainly awaits her; and from Dick’s account of her person—not yours, my dear—is likely to rear him a progeny of healthy and handsome children.”

A huge consolation to Letty, who for years past had looked upon her own boys as the certain heirs to all that Henry Bryanstone had to leave.

With more pain than any untruth had ever cost her in her life, she embodied old Sir Hyde’s

invitation in a little note, expressive of her desire to stretch forth the hand of sisterhood to Honoria. The note was answered by the bride herself—was short, to the point, neither too stiff nor too affable, and accepting at once, for dear Henry and herself, the invitation to Brentwood. They would come down by the afternoon train, only a few hours, that is to say, after the arrival of the letter.

“But what a hand!” said Letty to her uncle, as, ready dressed for dinner, they were waiting the arrival of Bryanstone and his wife. “Should you have thought it possible a governess, of all people living, could write such a scrawl?”

And she took from her pocket and displayed a handwriting something between that of an English washerwoman and the tracks made by a spider which has emerged from the ink-bottle.

“Oh, that is a thoroughly well-bred French hand,” said Sir Hyde, who was unusually genial and pleasant. “They all write that way. Don’t be censorious, Letty. I have made up my mind to fall in love with my niece the minute I see her.”

Hearing which statement from the head of the house, all the unimportant cousins, male and female, at once made up their minds to fall in love with her too.

Richard Fairfax, who had been out shooting all day, was just coming up the steps before the entrance door, his gun in his hand, as a carriage drove up the avenue with the expected guests. After a hasty shake of the hand, Honoria remarked that she must ask to be shown to her dressing-room at once, as they were already past their time; and the stately housekeeper having been summoned to attend upon Mr. Henry's bride, Bryanstone and his brother-in-law were left alone in the entrance-hall.

"Well, how are you, old fellow?" cried Richard, seizing Bryanstone's hand anew, and wringing it with all his might, as Englishmen do on the occasions when Frenchmen—horrible thought!—salute each other's hirsute faces. "Bearing up pretty well—eh? You know I haven't seen you since it happened."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Bryanstone, who was looking worn and bored. "What have you

been doing all this time? Saint Alban's fluke at the Leger was rather a surprise for us all, wasn't it?"

Instead of answering, Richard Fairfax looked long and steadily into Bryanstone's face. "Henry," he exclaimed, after a minute, "there's no good in you and me treating each other as strangers at this time of day. I've got something deuced unpleasant to tell you. Will you hear it at once or not?"

"About some dishonoured bill of poor little Chetwynd's, I suppose?"

"No, no, no, man!" interrupted Richard, his boyish face looking ominously staid and long. "It's nothing about horses or bills at all."

"Then keep it till after dinner, Dick," said Bryanstone, quietly. "Don't look so distressed, my dear fellow. Whatever it is, I shall doubtless bear it excellently well when I have drank my usual quantum of Sir Hyde's Madeira; does the old gentleman expect one to dress elaborately? I suppose there is a heap of relations above-stairs, as usual?"

"The old gentleman not only expects us to

dress elaborately, but on the present occasion will allow us just two minutes and a-half to dress in," answered Richard, looking at his watch. "Letty and the accustomed cousins are on the tenter-hooks of anxiety, you may be sure, to see you and—and——"

"Mrs. Bryanstone," Bryanstone finished for him. "The word does not come quite natural to one yet, does it, Dick?" And then they parted, with more constraint of manner than there had ever been between them in their lives before, and went their way up-stairs to their different rooms.

Mrs. Bryanstone waited, of course, until her husband came from his dressing-room; then, taking his arm, according to all bridal rule, swept down with him to the drawing-room. She was gorgeously got up in a dress of silvery sea-green silk, relieved by the softest lace; her ornaments of delicate Maltese silver, and with her hair marvellous (had she not travelled down in a forest of pins; bent upon utterly routing her adversaries from the first moment of attack?).

When the door opened Letty saw, with one glance of amazed sorrow, that this detestable woman was looking handsomer than ever. As for the country cousins, they positively started. Sir Hyde, courteously advancing, gave her face one rapid glance, *and remembered her* on the spot.

“How are you, sir?” said Bryanstone, shaking his hand. “My wife—Sir Hyde Bryanstone. We have not kept your dinner, I hope? That’s right. Letty, little woman, how are you?”

Letitia rushed forward and shed tears—they were quite genuine ones, tears of vexation—on her brother’s shoulder. “But he does not care for her!” she thought. “That is something. He wouldn’t speak so kindly to me if he did.” Then she turned, all the cousins looking on, and extended her hand to the bride. “Interloper, adventuress, betrayer of my brother’s peace!” the gesture said, as plainly as a gesture can speak. “An outraged family acknowledges you as far as is necessary for its own honour, and for every other sake than your own!” And when

she, further, deposited something emblematic of a kiss upon Mrs. Bryanstone's cheek, a visible thrill went through the ring of cousins; one of whom, indeed, a female, lifted up her pocket-handkerchief and wept.

But old Sir Hyde's manner to the bride was charming. He made her complimentary little speeches as he handed her down to dinner. He talked to her, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, which language he spoke perfectly, during the whole meal. Of Paris, of Germany: of foreign manners, cooking, dress, theatres—of every conceivable subject in which a young woman like herself could be supposed to take an interest, did Sir Hyde Bryanstone discourse. Honoria felt more at her ease than she had done any time during the last two years of her life; instinctively knowing that her interlocutor did not wish to trip her up—as, indeed, he did not; he was too sure of his own memory to need confirmation—and chatted and laughed, quite undaunted by Letty's frigid, jealous face immediately opposite her at the table. The cousins all thought Mrs. Henry must be a very nice

person indeed, as Sir Hyde took so much notice of her : and the meal that everybody had thought would be such an ordeal, passed off as charmingly as though none of the persons sitting round the table had been relations.

But when Bryanstone and Richard were left alone with Sir Hyde—for the male cousins were of an age to be sent away shortly after the ladies—the old man turned round, sharp, upon his nephew, and, without any softening preamble whatever, exclaimed, “How the devil did you pick up that woman, Henry ?”

“Well, sir,” answered Bryanstone, with a sort of short laugh, “I should think it would be more to the point, perhaps, if you were to inquire how the devil she picked me up ?”

“Not at all,” said Sir Hyde. “*That’s* simple enough. When you were mad or drunk, which comes to the same thing. I’ve known such women do it scores and scores of times, and with wiser men than you. What I want to know is, how, and where you picked her up ? For, of course, I can’t suppose that you don’t know what she is ?”

"Well, no," said Bryanstone, curtly; "certainly not. She is my wife."

"And what before?"

"Letty's governess for ten days. Old Mrs. Forsyth's companion for a year and a-half."


"And before?"

"A pupil-teacher in an English school since she was a girl of fifteen."

"And you believe that last statement?"

"I have not taken the pains to disbelieve it."

"Henry, the woman you have married was, in the year eighteen hundred and fifty —, exactly eight years ago, a public dancer in Paris, and the name she went under was Nita. She came out at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin, and for one season obtained extraordinary success, through her face and arms alone. The next winter they tried to bring her out at the Opera, and on the second night of her appearance the Parisians found out that she couldn't dance a step—they were dying to get back Rosati, and jealous of any new pretender to their favour—and hissed her off the stage. I was present myself. What she may have been



doing since I don't know. At the time of her failure I recollect she started, as the Nadedja had done the year before, for St. Petersburg, and I heard of her a year or two afterwards as a small actress in Vienna."

"Are you sure of this? Will you swear to what you say?" cried Bryanstone, in an unnaturally quiet voice, but with a face the colour of stone. For in this minute of time every foregone unheeded scrap of evidence; Laura Hamilton's inquiries at Peckham; Tontin's recollections of Honoria at Vienna; a hundred vague and reasonless suspicions of his own, had started up with sudden damning clearness upon his memory. "Will you swear to the truth of what you state, sir?"

"Yes, certainly, I will swear to it," replied Sir Hyde, unhesitatingly. "Why, I was in one of the stage-boxes. I saw her face as plain as I do yours, at the moment they hissed her off, poor beggar; and besides, I knew her perfectly well by sight the winter before, like every one else in Paris. Take her there, if you want Nita the dancer to be identified. Hers is not a face

to forget. I knew her the moment I saw her on your arm to-night," added old Sir Hyde, bitterly.

And then there was a dead silence. In the first shock of any great misfortune, I have remarked that the last thing men ever do is to talk. Bryanstone himself was the first to speak. "If it was any one but you, sir, I should say there *must* be an error in this. Why, putting everything else aside, she has shown me letters, papers, bills, that proved her for years to have lived in that boarding-school at Peckham."

"And if she showed them to me, and if she took her oath to the fact of her having lived there, and if the owners of the school took their oaths to it too, I would believe none of them," said Sir Hyde, firmly. "Of course, you'll act as you choose now, as you did in marrying; but whatever you do, take my advice on this point—don't make the scandal public all at once."

"I should say don't make any scandal at all," cried Richard Fairfax, looking up for the first time from the walnuts he was pretending to peel. "You'll have other work on your hands without that; and after all, there are many women

of the world as bad—I mean there are many actresses as good, and a deuced deal better than half the women of the world you meet! Why, think of all the actresses who have married from the English stage alone. The Countess of —, Lady —”

“Dick,” interrupted Bryanstone, leaning forward, and putting his hand on his brother-in-law’s shoulder, as he used to do in their troubles when they were little lads together, “if a man, with his eyes open, likes to marry a woman of any calling whatsoever, he is no true man unless he holds by his choice afterwards, so long as she carries out her compact with him. I married a woman who represented herself to be without money, without birth. So I took her; and so, if I prove her to be true, will I hold to her. If I find her account of herself false; if I find this accursed story of yours to be true, sir,” and he turned to old Sir Hyde, “from that hour she leaves my side for ever. I’ll have no scandal about it—don’t fear! Letty and the children shan’t be injured by such a shame! She shall go quietly; well-pensioned, laying the full blame

on me, if need be ; but she shall go—I swear it ! Now, the thing is for me to get to the end of it all quickly. I will be just—I will be just. She shall be allowed to speak for herself. She shall not be condemned unheard, whatever she is.”

Old Sir Hyde rose, took snuff from the great gold box upon the mantel-piece ; turned, sat down, and then looked straight again at his nephew.


“How did that woman marry you, Henry ?” he asked, almost in a whisper. “Were you mad or drunk, which ?”

“Sir,” answered Bryanstone, “I was drunk. But drunk or sober, I should have married her just the same. I was in one of those positions in which a man has no choice left him.”

“I understand—I have heard as much before. She made her way into your house ; and to save her honour, you have surrendered your own.”

“All that belongs to the past,” interrupted Bryanstone, moodily. “We have nothing to do with it now.”

“Of course we have not—of course we have not,” said Sir Hyde ; “we have only to do with



it thus far. Is a woman, who acted as Mrs. Bryanstone acted then, a woman to be trusted now? Assume that what I tell you is true, and that you accuse her of it openly. There may be accomplices—well, old associates, then, if you dislike the term—to be silenced; facts to be falsified; plots, of which you can scarcely form a conception, to be formed. And mind, an adventuress, who has played for and won such a stake, won't be over scrupulous as to the means by which she holds it. At all events, you play directly into her hands by letting her know what you are about. And if she is guilty, Henry, she deserves no quarter from you! Treat her with justice—let her have your protection before the world as long as she is suspected only. But keep your counsel to yourself. The means of proving whether I am right will not be difficult to find out. Nor," he added, "will the prosecution itself be a lengthy one."

"And assuming that you are wrong," said Bryanstone, after a minute's thought, "which you must at least acknowledge to be possible?"

"Assuming that I am wrong," answered Sir

Hyde, "it would be simply offering a gratuitous insult to an innocent woman to let her know of what she has been accused. Whichever way you view it, the common sense view of the matter is clear. If you inquire into it at all, let your wife remain supremely ignorant of your inquiries."

"*If* I inquire into it," remarked Bryanstone, with a grim smile. "Give me the wine, Dick, and don't look so woe-begone. One would think you had got some pleasant information to give me next."

"And so I have," cried Fairfax, starting up and speaking fast, with the kind of convulsive resolution a man feels when his horse, not his own will, is taking him straight at a fence he would give anything to shirk. "I hinted so to you before dinner. I've some deuced unpleasant information to give you, and you may as well hear it at once. It's in everybody's mouth that that blackguard Lumley talks about your wife; he says he knew her abroad, and—good God! Henry, that I should be the man to say it—that the whole thing was a plant. He knew from

the first minute he saw you together how Miss Forrester was going to sell you. There! what choice had I but to tell him, sir?" he added, addressing himself to Sir Hyde.


"None," said the old man, deliberately. "Just as he has no choice but to tell Mr. Lumley, in the most public manner possible, that he lies. You must do that duty first, Henry. Any search you may make afterwards is for your own private satisfaction."

"Yes," said Bryanstone, in a steady voice; but with his face horribly set, and white as marble. "If Dick's story is true, that will be my first duty, certainly. I ought to have done it years ago," he added, absently, after a minute or two's silence, and speaking more to himself than to his companions. "It's an old score. I ought to have shot him, like the hound he was, after laying his cowardly hand upon *her*. Tell me the words again, Dick, the precise words, and the man or men you heard them from—one must be exact in these things—and pass the claret. The '47, sir, still, I perceive," he added turning quietly to old Sir Hyde.

CHAPTER IX.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

“WHATEVER words you may use, Henry, choose the place well. I’ve seen as many of these affairs, perhaps, as any man in Europe, and all my observation has convinced me that a well-chosen place is everything in taking the first or initiative step. To insult a man inside a club or in the house of a friend is unwarrantable, save in hot blood, and under circumstances of immediate and gross provocation. To insult him without sufficient witnesses, or before witnesses of the wrong kind, is worse still. If he’s a scoundrel like this Lumley, you never know what dirty falsifications he and his friends will set abroad respecting the beginning of the quarrel. You must meet him anywhere but in a club or a friend’s house, and you must have at



least two men of unimpeachable character, not related to yourself, present at the time, with as many more friends of his, to force him to take up the affront. As to the words, none, in my opinion, for a low-born person like this, come up to the two time-honoured and simple expressions, liar and coward. But of this you must be the best judge when the time arrives."

It was long past midnight, and the three men were still sitting beside the dining-room fire. At ten o'clock, Sir Hyde and Richard had gone up for half an hour to the drawing-room; after which the ladies, only too glad to lose sight of each other, had retired, Sir Hyde playfully informing Letty and the bride before parting from them that their husbands were going to have a bachelor carouse with him as of old, and would not be heard of certainly until the following morning.

Honoria, usually most acutely suspicious, was thoroughly disarmed by Sir Hyde's *bonhomme*. It augured well for her, she thought, that the astute old man of the world held out his hand

to her at once. She could brave all Mrs. Letty's coldness so long as the head of the family received her unhesitatingly as his niece. And directly her head was on her pillow, and during all that long night of agony to Bryanstone, the woman who was the cause of it slept—no very unfrequent case with guilty people—like a child.

I do not use the word "agony" unadvisedly. Pride in his old unsullied name, personal pride, honour, vanity, all the strongest feelings of Bryanstone's, as of most men's natures, were stabbed to the quick by this blow that he had newly got. He was very quiet, as it was his temperament to be, under any strong emotion ; listened calmly to the shrewd worldly advice of old Sir Hyde, the kindly little outbursts of sympathy from Richard,—the only two men on earth, mind, from whom, in such a strait, he could have received either advice or sympathy. He would go to London to-morrow morning, leaving Honoria (this Sir Hyde insisted upon) at Brentwood ; would see Lumley at once ; and then go on to Paris—leaving the arrangements

for a meeting, if there was to be a meeting, in the hands of his friends.

"Before I run the chance of being shot," he said, "and Lumley, if his nerves will let him, can shoot, I should like to have set my mind at rest about her. If anything happens it won't matter much to me, probably, whether my wife was Nita the dancer or Honoria Forrester the governess; but I think it would give my hand additional steadiness for him to know that he had accused her wrongly."

"The place to meet him will be Tattersall's, I think," remarked Richard. "Poor little Chetwynd's horses are to be brought to the hammer to-morrow, and lots of fellows are coming up, I know, for the sale. As Lumley was one of the principal men who ruined him, no doubt he'll be one of the first among the Philistines. Really, with London as empty as it is, it's a shame to think of such a sale. Henry!" he added, "only that, of course, you don't care to talk of the subject now, I should advise you not to let such a chance pass. That black horse he gave five hundred guineas for in the spring


would be just the thing for you,—bone, size, everything you want, and thorough-bred as Eclipse.”

“Well, we can do both kinds of business at once, then,” said Bryanstone. “Whatever domestic happiness is before me, and whether I shoot Lumley or not,—in fact, under all conditions of life, except that of being shot myself, I shall probably continue to want horses. I remember the one you mean, but I doubt any horse out of Chetwynd’s stables carrying weight enough for me, except as a hack. I shall ride heavier than I used, Dick ; German food and want of exercise have added a stone to my weight, at least, since last summer.”

But though Bryanstone’s voice and manner were so composed as to deceive his companions,—almost himself,—for we often unconsciously gauge our own mental suffering by the outward or bodily signs of it,—though he shook old Sir Hyde’s hand with as warm a grasp, parted from Richard with as careless a good-night as in the old days when he was a schoolboy spending his jovial holidays at Brentwood, it needed only for

him to be alone,—the strong man with his own fresh-smitten pride, his own loathing sense of new dishonour,—for him to realise to the full *what* shame this was that had come upon him! what foul whispered story this was that had thus suddenly turned aside the current of his life!

He did not love Honoria. This, he said to himself, was something. The kind of shipwreck that a girl's fair face had once wrought for him was at least not in her power to effect. All that a man must feel for the woman who bears his name, who holds his honour in her hands, he felt. Nothing more. She was a finished actress; but there is one part that no actress living can act, save behind the footlights,—love! Before he had been married to her a week, Bryanstone knew that she had not risked her reputation for him, but for herself. Knew it how, shall I say? Not by any coarse manifestations of want of regard,—she was too clever, too refined for this,—but rather by the nameless lack of all those thousand untaught and pathetic signs by which a man instinctively feels when a woman loves him.



And this—real passionate love—on her side, was the only thing that could have wiped out his recollection of the way in which he had been won. Failing in it, he did begin to feel, beautiful though Honoria was, from the earliest days of their marriage, how horrible a folly he had committed in marrying her. As a companion even she did not amuse him. The gist of half-legitimate flirtation and of her mock confidences respecting Lumley over, Honoria had very little, really, to say. How can a woman who only dare speak of one year and a half out of her whole bygone life say much? All the knowledge of the London world, and of London people, that had made Laura Hamilton so welcome to him as a companion, was wanting in his wife. She had none of the fresh, English, girlish ways of thought that had made him take so strongly to poor little Nelly Bertram. A foreigner, whose whole thoughts were of society and of her own successes; a foolish woman, who spent her life between putting up her hair on pins and taking it down again; these were the ideas, joined to that other less

pleasant one still of a woman who had feigned a love she never felt to win him, that Bryanstone had entertained of his wife whenever he was obliged to think of her at all. And during the short four months of their marriage his time, greatly to her relief, had been spent much more in the society of such men as Homburg, Baden, and Brussels could afford than in hers.

But not to be in love with the woman one has married is no new or startling phase of human experience. Bryanstone just thought that, like other men, he had made a mistake. That Mrs. Bryanstone bored him a great deal, and that—well, when they got back to London, and she could run about to balls and operas, and leave him free to do as he chose, she would bore him less. Now, ordinary matrimonial disappointment had turned to keenest disgust; something scarcely deeper than indifference, into worse than hatred: the commonplace, dull road wherein his own folly had condemned him to walk had ended abruptly in a precipice. He, Henry Bryanstone, upon whose good name no faintest breath of suspicion had ever past,

married to a fourth-rate French dancer, a woman to whom society accords not even a doubtful character! And the world already cognisant—although he was not—of his shame.

So long as he was in the presence of others, he could scarce have told whether, in his own soul, he believed the accusation or not. He had to act the part, at least, of refusing to condemn her unheard; had to listen to the opinions of his companions; to go into details of the immediate work that lay before him. The moment he was alone he felt that every word of Sir Hyde's story was true, and of Farnham Lumley's also. As heat brings out words written in invisible ink, the first scorching words of suspicion seemed to evoke before him all the evidence, unheeded hitherto, of the past. Mrs. Hamilton's account of the sick, secluded teacher, so unlike Miss Forrester in everything; her incapacity to teach Letty's children; Tontin's vague recollections of her face; the strangely-familiar terms upon which she stood with Farnham Lumley from the first—and against all this, what? Her own word, and the books and letters of a certain

date which had been in the possession of some person named Honoria Forrester at Peckham.

I repeat, he *felt* that he had been betrayed ; and following the law of all great suffering, the idea of his betrayal had grown old to him at once. We need time to accustom us to a new happiness. A day, an hour after a new calamity, we feel that it is as familiar to us as our own right hand. It seemed to Bryanstone as though he could never have been wholly free from the stain of this accursed marriage of his. The blot seemed already to have stained back through all the whitest pages of his youth. Lady Sarah ; the June nights when he stood, his arm round her waist, in the silent clover-fields ; his school-boy days here at Brentwood ; his mother, who had been buried a quarter of a century ago ; all the fairest recollections of his life rose before him, and all were tainted with some thought of Honoria Forrester ! Nita, the dancer—Lumley's accomplice—his wife !

The rooms that had been given to himself and his bride were the same that, since he was a boy, had always been looked upon as “ Mr.

Henry's"; two large low rooms in the oldest part of the house. One, that had been his study, or sanctum, in old days, was arranged now as a dressing-room; and the high-piled wood fire still smouldered on the hearth as he entered it. He stirred up the embers; threw on some fresh logs; and then drew an arm-chair before the fire, seated himself there, and thought.

God keep you and me, reader, from such a vigil as that while we live!

The little time-piece on the mantel-piece roused him at length, with a start, from his thoughts by striking three! Then it occurred to him to wonder how his wife was spending this night. Was she watching for him? was her uneasy conscience conjuring up visions of evil from his absence? Acting simply from an impulse he did not stop to question, Bryanstone rose, walked across the room, and, after pausing a moment, and hearing no sound from within, noiselessly opened the door which divided the two rooms, and went up to Honoria's side.

One of her greatest accomplishments, or per-

haps it may have been a natural gift, was the grace with which she slept. A silver night-lamp was placed on a table beside the bed, so as to throw an aureole of yellow light about her face; and as Bryanstone stood and watched her he was overcome with a sense, stronger than he had ever felt before, of her exceeding physical beauty. Slightly flushed; her lips just parted, and no more; with a breathing sweet and noiseless as a child's; and one white hand carelessly thrown back above her head—an artist might have taken this woman as a model, an incarnation of innocent, untroubled sleep. In the subdued light, and with the soft white of the cambric and lace of her pillows to relieve the outlines of the face, she was undisguised even by the inevitable nocturnal pinning up of her hair; nay, as he looked longer at her, Bryanstone could not but notice how noble a sweep of brow those yellow curls were daily made to hide away. He leant a little over her (not relenting, he was not a man to relent; but with one of those mixed feelings, half pity for himself and half for her, which most of us sustain when we chant the

“De Profundis” of any dead love, even one that has been false from the first), and in doing so saw, what he had never seen before, a long, jagged cicatrice on the left side of the full, blue-veined forehead that was lying bare to his gaze.

Every one who can analyse his own emotions at all, must be familiar with those sudden, unbidden bursts of memory ; those trains of reasoning, too subtle, too fine for us even to follow, but whose results we accept, and call instinct, or intuition. Such an instinct—if we must call it so—appealed to Bryanstone with terrible force at this moment.

“The cut was deep, and mortally close to the temple.” Why he had been through all this before. He had stood and looked at her like this—for so does the mind confuse the present with the past, the real with the ideal—had heard those words from Farnham Lumley’s lips ! He had forgotten every circumstance of the dinner-party itself ; had been unconscious at the time while he talked to Fanny and to De Basompierre that any of Lumley’s whispers had

reached him from the conservatory. But the brain, without a man's own consciousness, can write down on its mysterious tablets terrible evidence against himself, to be brought to light, as now, without recollection of the time or place in which the record was written. Stronger than all that he had heard against her to-night, was the mute witness that that scar upon the temple bore against Honoria to her husband. How, great Heavens! and where, had Lumley known this woman, whom men knew now as Henry Bryanstone's wife? Was the shame he had faced to-night nothing in comparison of the blackness to come? Would he have to pray that the worst thing he might hear of the woman he had married was that she had been a ballet-dancer in her youth? He turned away from her with a shudder, and without looking at her face again. Then returned to his place before the fire in his dressing-room, and waited for the day.

When the day came, all those who looked at him saw that Henry Bryanstone's face had suddenly oldened by a dozen years!

CHAPTER X.

A DINNER IN LEICESTER SQUARE.

HONORIA quickest of all.

“He has heard something,” she thought. “This was the meaning of the bachelor’s carouse, for this he had been watching through the night. Now begins the fight in earnest. Is it the French valet, or Laura Hamilton, or Stretton? No; he would never dare betray me, and the money can’t be gone yet. It must be that scoundrel Lumley. Oh, how different my life would be if I could work without making use of such vile materials!”

She acquiesced quietly when Bryanstone told her he was going to London with Fairfax for a week or two, and that she must remain at Brentwood without him.

“A sale of horses! Oh, Henry, don’t forget

to look out for a beautiful one for me ; and— and don't be angry, but *would* you mind my going up with you as far as Reading ? I want so much to spend a day with an old friend of mine, my favourite pupil, and she is married to a curate now ; they live just outside the town, and have two little girls—one called after me—, and I could return very well by the last train to-night ? ”

She felt that if Bryanstone indeed suspected her, was on her track, the first persons whom he would be certain to find out would be the Jarvises. What would their answer be to his inquiries ? A girl named Honoria Forrester, of half-French extraction, had lived with them for seven years ; had left them in delicate health for Mrs. Forsyth's service two years ago, and, although she corresponded, had never been to see them since. Then would come more questions, questions as to her appearance—and Bryanstone possessed her photograph — that could have but one result. She must be beforehand with him. She must see these old women first. A little good acting, a little artistic

making up, a sentimental story of a suspicious husband, and the Miss Jarvises, good innocent fools, no doubt, would be' ready to swear anything she bid them. At all events she must, at once and at all hazards, see them. She had taken bolder steps than cozening simple women out of the evidence of their own eyes before; would have to run far greater risks of failure still, if the terrible game that she saw before her was indeed to be played out. And taking her husband's silence as assent, she got ready by an early hour for her journey, and started off in cheerful spirits with him and Richard Fairfax to the train.

In such cheerful spirits, indeed, was Mrs. Bryanstone, that she talked a great deal more than was her wont during the entire journey; rallied her husband playfully on his silent temper; chattered away her hopes to Richard that he would insist upon Henry getting her a horse—"not too spirited, for you know, Mr. Fairfax, I never had any experience in riding till poor Mr. Lumley," casting down her eyes, "was so good as to put his horses at my disposal, but

showy, and looking more spirited than he is. Just think what a change it will be to me! I, who for seven years never went out, except to church, or saw a horse or carriage, except the doctor's, to have a brougham—Henry says I shall—of my own, and riding-horses too! Oh, what will the dear good Miss Jarvises say the first time they see me as a grande dame?"

And then she expatiated upon Miss Jarvis, and the old school days, and the Reverend Alfred Prettyman, and her favourite pupils, with an expansion quite unusual: for, as I have said, Mrs. Bryanstone, since her marriage, had considered it wise to be taciturn.

"And when shall you drive to Peckham, then?" said Bryanstone once; the only time he opened his lips, save to smoke—for they were in a coupé, and one of Honoria's virtues was her love for tobacco smoke. "The first day you get into your new carriage, I suppose?"

"Oh, I shan't have to go to Peckham at all," she answered innocently. "Didn't you know the Jarvises have left long ago? They live now—let me see—at number 120, Guilford Street,

poor old souls ! or rather, they did when I heard of them last, a good many months ago. Just opposite the Foundling, you know, where you see the dear little children walk out in their white tippets and yellow stockings."

He was on the track. With a beating heart she felt that, as she sat, smiling, doubtless at the recollection of the dear children's yellow stockings, and looking out as they whirled along at the dreary December morning. He had asked the question on purpose. Well, she had the start. The Jarvises had left Guilford Street more than a year ago. By the time he had been there, and followed them to their new abode, she would have seen them. "The rest," true to her creed, she thought, "is for fate to do. I can only act out the part immediately before me to my best."

With a smiling little adieu to Fairfax, a kiss—the last she ever pressed there—on Bryanstone's forehead, she tripped out of the carriage at Reading. It was the first carriage of the train, and Richard Fairfax and her husband saw her move away quickly and disappear among the crowd of people on the platform.

"I feel a weight off my mind," said Bryanstone, when the train had started again. "Acting with a woman isn't an occupation to my mind. The air feels freer with every mile that takes me from her."

When the express stopped, a quarter of a mile from Paddington, the guard who collected tickets was imploringly addressed by a beautiful young woman, alone in a first-class carriage, at the extreme end of the train. Would he tell her, please, what she should do? She was to have stopped at Reading, and she never heard the name called, and they had brought her on all the way to London. What must she pay? how must she act?

She spoke in slightly-broken English, and looked with her soft caressing eyes straight into the guard's face. (A very handsome face too, Honoria thought: Saxon, fresh, manly, and with the winter dew clinging to his light-brown beard and hair.) Would he let her make it right here? taking out her purse. She was so afraid of being thought to deceive the company, or anything.

I am not acquainted so thoroughly with the

by-laws of the Great Western as to state what was the guard's precise duty at this moment. What he did was to receive the additional payment of six-and-fourpence on the beautiful young woman's ticket; vouchsafe information as to the next down-train to Reading; and altogether look much more admiringly upon her face than his legitimate possessor in Wiltshire would probably have thought demanded by the occasion.

"So far, so good," thought Mrs. Bryanstone, putting on a prodigiously thick Shetland veil, and pinning her travelling-plaid up round her shoulders. "Now, if I can only keep dark sufficiently long at Paddington, I shall be safe for the time being, at least."

She kept dark, searching with artistic rendering of the traditional lonely female for one small bag, about fifteen inches by ten, that she had herself stowed impracticably away under the seat; and by the time she left the carriage, not a soul but the railway officials and one or two benighted old ladies, who ought to have been met, and were not met, was to be seen on the platform.

"Four-wheel or two, miss?" asked a policeman, in spite of the thick Shetland veil and travelling-plaid, taking her measure pretty accurately.

"Two," answered Honoria, who hated like a man being shut up; and in another minute she had still further confirmed Policeman X's diagnosis by giving the address of a certain stage hair-dresser in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, and was driving cheerfully along the foggy streets;—not a hundred yards behind the other Hansom that contained Richard Fairfax and her husband.

"But for this detestable veil I could smoke," she thought. "How miserably trammelled women are in everything they have to do. How wonderful it is that, struggling against conventionalities and men, and their own sex most of all, any women ever succeed—but they do!"

Without the solace of artificial stimulant, however, Honoria's spirits were really first-rate. Action, intrigue, danger even, were as much better to sitting in a drawing-room with Letty, embroidering, as driving disreputably alone in a

Hansom was to being boxed up, like other women she passed on the road from the station, with their babies and husbands and band-boxes inside hot, stuffy, immaculate private broughams. She had staked all, would stake all again, for respectability ; and this her first transient escape from respectability was the hour in which, for the first time since she married, she felt anything of the old hearty zest in life. Put a *gamin* in the best-regulated infant-school, a gipsy in a duke's livery, then leave a door open on a summer's morning, and you will just see how the same unconquerable instinct works. No Arab, whether of the street or of the desert, ever thoroughly settles till you have six feet of earth over him ; and then—well, then Arab and householder are about equally contented—for aught, at least, that we can tell to the contrary.

The hair-dresser's shop in Hart Street, where she dismissed the cab, was not unknown to Honoria. She had been there once, rather more than three years ago, in the discharge of a little affair she had on hand just then. The same lovely gentleman's head, with eyelashes carefully

planted in pink waxen lids, vermilion nostrils, and velvet toga, still stood in the window: the same chocolate-coloured Frenchwoman, of inscrutable age, still stood behind the counter.

Madame desired to be coiffée? Would madame give herself the trouble to ascend? And the chocolate-coloured dame pointed to a grimy winding-staircase in the middle of the shop, and sent a message through a funnel beside her elbow to the potentates of the first-floor.

Now Mrs. Bryanstone had not given herself the trouble of coming all the way to this small French hair-dresser's for nothing, as you will see.

"Monsieur," she remarked, in French, to the diminutive male creature who stood, a comb behind its ear, and a pinafore on its breast, bowing her into the salon de coiffure, an unsavoury room of about ten feet by eight. "Monsieur," and she took off her hat, "you remark the colour of my hair? Good; I require it changed to auburn, châtain-roux, for a piece I play in to-night. Can you do it? No dye, of course; one of the deep ochre washes that

will come out with soap and water. Here is the tint." And she produced and unfolded a packet in which lay a thick piece of dull reddish hair—hair as unlike her own silky locks in hue and texture as you could well imagine.

Monsieur took up the pattern or sample and held it close to Honoria's head. What Madame required was next to impossible, he averred. No colour more difficult to imitate, except in permanent dye. Indeed, he knew only one very expensive preparation, to which he gave a name of about seven syllables, that could effect it.

"Then get the expensive material ready at once, Monsieur," said Honoria, with the good-humour that the mere sight of a Frenchman could produce in her at once. "I knew that if there was one person in London who could do it for me it was yourself," she added, seating herself, and allowing the little man to swathe her in a wide-flowing, but not too clean, print dressing-gown. "It is Monsieur's speciality. Why, I remember your once turning red hair to golden. That, I am sure,

is a much greater difficulty than to make light hair red."

Monsieur, at this appeal to his memory, eyed Mrs. Bryanstone more closely. "It was about three years or so ago," he remarked, after a minute's mysterious deliberation, "and Madame was——"

"Yes, Madame was—the other person!" interrupted Honoria, with great good temper. "Well, the positions are reversed now. And I only hope your success will be as great as it was before."

And then Monsieur unpinned her tresses, real and artificial, and the little Louis Seize curls were combed out straight, and the process of red-washing began.

"If I recollect right, we had every adventitious aid on the occasion referred to," remarked the Frenchman once, in the pause of allowing one mystic fluid to dry before the application of the next. "Madame confided to me that the chastened light of a sacred edifice and the flowing drapery of a lace veil would be there to aid the success of my poor efforts?"

"Oh, yes," said Honoria, promptly; "all that

was to be part of the *mise en scène*. It will be different now." She smiled to herself as she said this. "I shall be looked at without the sacred edifice or flowing veil, or religious observance of any kind."

"But on the boards always, and by gaslight, Madame?"

"Oh, of course, on the boards and by gaslight," answered Mrs. Bryanstone.

When the process was at an end, she requested the Frenchman to arrange her hair after the English fashion of a dozen years ago—for so her part required,—in a squarish line, that is to say, on the forehead, well brought down upon the cheeks, padded at the sides, and with a black velvet bow (this she had ready with her) at the back. You can scarcely imagine a travestie more complete than was effected by this change from silken locks, waving like flakes of gold upon the forehead, classically straight from the temples, and with cunning, careless curls floating on the shoulders, to a carrotty, pomatumed head, dressed after one of the most hideous fashions that the female of our species

has ever adopted. Honoria surveyed her own image with undisguised content, complimented Monsieur on his success, and then demanded a towel and warm water to wash away one or two slight stains which she affirmed that she saw upon her forehead. She washed not only her forehead but her whole face, and behold ! another metamorphosis. Her skin was not bad, far from that ; it was still a smooth, thoroughly wholesome skin, but it had lost all the indescribable softness, the peach-like bloom, which was her especial beauty ordinarily. In fine, an hour ago, a woman at whose radiant hair and skin every man that met her must turn to gaze, entered this hair-dresser's shop. There left it now a commonplace young person, of seven or eight and twenty, with a pale face, red hair, and no greater beauty than that of any other woman in the crowd.

"So much for good art," thought Honoria, when she found herself driving away again, her purse considerably lighter after paying Monsieur's little fee, but her pocket fuller from all the lovely golden curls carefully stowed away

there. "I walked the whole length of that filthy Hart Street on purpose, and not a creature looked at me,—what a life plain women must have of it, by the way! Oh, that I may seem hideous and *vraisemblable* enough in the eyes of those old Hecates I'm going to! Which is the oldest, I wonder, and which must I call 'Miss Jane?' I must wait till I hear them speak to each other before I commit myself. Heavens! if I should meet him there! But it's scarcely possible—and if I do—if I do—discovery can only come once—and heartless as they all are, they could not, dare not, leave me penniless. After my generosity, too, in marrying him without settlements! Yes, I shall carry it through—I feel it"—at this juncture she unfolded a huge paper of chocolats that she had bought on her road, and began cracking them between her white teeth with all the gusto of a Parisian workgirl enjoying her Sunday in the Bois. "I'll go to the Sablon Rouge to dine," she thought, when her little luncheon was finished. "No one would recognise me drest in this frightful English hat and veil, and 'twill cheer

my spirits up to talk to the waiters in French. Then to another hair-dresser, unless I've time before dinner—go back from red to yellow, from forty to eighteen, and then back to Brentwood and Sir Hyde, and dear Letty, and the cousins. What a day I shall have had of it! The most amusing altogether that I've spent since I married Mr. Bryanstone."

The address from which the Misses Jarvis had last written to her, on Mrs. Forsyth's death, was No. 1, Mignonette Villas, Brixton. To No. 1, Mignonette Villas, Honoria now drove, and to her satisfaction found that the old ladies still lived there, and were at home. She dismissed the cab, rightly judging that if her husband should arrive, she would stand more chance of detection with a cabman ready to volunteer information at the front door; and, not without considerable beating of her heart, followed in an elderly woman-servant who had answered the bell.

"What name shall I say?" asked the old body, looking suspiciously through Honoria's

veil, as she stood, her hand on the lock of the parlour door. "Miss or Missus?"

"Mrs. Bryanstone," said Honoria, still keeping her veil down, in her utter ignorance whether the servant was a creature to be recognised or not. "Miss Jarvis will know who I am."

And then the door opened, and "Mrs. Bryanstone" was announced; the old woman, after the manner of old familiar servants, waiting with two inches of the door ajar to see what sort of reception might accrue to the visitor.

Two meek-looking elderly women, dressed in black, sat before the fire. Twenty years' teaching did not seem to have resulted in much temporal success to the Misses Jarvis, but poor though their little parlour and their dress were, Honoria saw at a glance that they were gentlewomen, and felt relieved. She knew that she could appeal better to an educated audience than to the coarse sympathies of outspoken question-asking vulgarity. These poor, broken, spiritless old ladies would not have life enough in them to question her, or animal strength

enough to make the physical effort of disbelieving.

She threw back her veil with a quick, natural gesture, like that of a person coming home, took off her hat, and approached to the older, and she fervently trusted the blinder, of the two sisters. "Miss Jarvis, you recognise me!" she exclaimed.

But Miss Jarvis did not recognise her. The old servant in announcing her had changed Bryanstone into Bridleton, or some such name, and both of the ladies rose and stared politely, but without speaking, at their unexpected guest. Honoria's breath came thick. Had she been over-bold? Was the travestie that had once been so successful, a failure this time?

"You—you don't remember Honoria Forrester," she murmured, and tears rushed up to her eyes. "Am I indeed so changed?"

"Honoria!" cried the younger sister, and in a minute her arms were round the visitor's neck. "Dear child—this is a surprise, indeed! I thought it was Honoria Forrester," she added, turning to her sister, "and yet I couldn't trust

myself to speak. You are changed—wonderfully changed—so stout, so improved in every way, my dear—Mrs. Bryanstone, I ought to say. Sister, is she not changed?”

Now the elder Miss Jarvis, a very shrewd, sensible woman, had long been failing in her eyesight, and necessarily took for granted whatever Miss Jane, who could see, but was the weakest and most gullible of human creatures, chose to assert. “I see worse than ever, my dear,” she said kindly, taking Mrs. Bryanstone’s hand, “and for a moment I certainly did not recognise your voice. Bridget,” and she turned to the door, “are you there? Come in and see Mademoiselle. I dare say Bridget remembered you quicker than either of us, dear. Bridget never forgets a face she has once seen.”

This pleasant announcement made Honoria turn abruptly away from the light as the old woman entered. However, she put on a very hearty manner, and holding out her hand, hoped condescendingly that Bridget had not forgotten her.

But Bridget, a steadfast servant, a friend of

thirty years to the Jarvises, had always entertained a profound abhorrence for all the foreign masters and governesses connected with the school, "Mamselle Honore" not excepted; and her reception of Mrs. Bryanstone's condescension was far from genial. Ignoring the proffered hand, she walked up to her and looked close—so close as to make Mrs. Bryanstone shudder—at her new-dyed, stiff-pomatumed hair; then at her face; and finally at every item of dress in which she stood.

"Fine feathers makes fine birds, and dress, for certain, makes people look different," she remarked, when her inventory was finished; and, addressing herself to the elder Miss Jarvis, not the visitor. "If Mamselle was in her black frock again, I don't say there'd be much difference to speak of, except the colour of her hair, which it's well known as oiling and pomatuming will alter the sandiest. Mamselle is stouter, as we all grow in the course of years, and redder i' the face"—Mrs. Bryanstone was red enough at this moment—"and that's all that I see her changed."

And then Bridget, with obtrusive disregard of the presence of company, made inquiries as to whether dinner was to be served at the usual time or not, and strode out of the room.

“Catch me a-stuffing up the heads of any of your furrin trumpery,” she thought to herself as she pared the potatoes. “She’s changed as I wouldn’t have known her on the street—quite the lady now, bless you! and her freckles took away, and her sallow thin cheeks spread out with good eating, and her carroty ’ead a-greased up to the nines, and so fine we can stoop to shake hands with a servant in our grand kid gloves! But catch me a-puffing you up, my lady!” thought Bridget, fiercely. “Catch me a-being carpeted and catechised by all the furrin governesses as walk! She may be married, or she mayn’t! Tain’t by marriage that the likes of *she* comes, ornary, by black velvet mantles and hats and feathers, and the beautifullest brown silk dress, that ’ud stand alone, and trailing half-a-yard in the mud behind—drat her.”

Our enemies oftentimes serve us better than

our friends. In her wholesome fear of ministering to "Mamselle's" pride, poor old Bridget had unconsciously given the strongest evidence to her identity.

"She is as rough as ever, you see," said Miss Jane to Honoria, "though good and faithful always. But Bridget is right in one thing," she added, turning to her sister; "our dear Mademoiselle is wonderfully stouter than she used to be. Do you know, Mad...—Mrs. Bryanstone, I ought to say—that when you left we were very uneasy about you; indeed, I don't mind saying it, now you look so stout and well, Doctor Pinniger had the very gravest doubts himself as to the state of your lungs."

"Great Heavens, who's Dr. Pinniger?" thought Honoria. "I must get them away out of all this dreadful labyrinth as quickly as possible. I have been much better since my marriage, dear Miss Jane." It seemed the household custom to prefix the adjective "dear" to all proper names, and she accepted it unconditionally. "My husband and I have spent some time in travelling abroad, which, as far

as health goes, has been of great benefit to me."

And emphasising 'health' with a sigh, Mrs. Bryanstone seated herself on the sofa beside Miss Jane, and put on the kind of face young married women do put on when they want to be questioned as to their domestic happiness.

Miss Jane gave a little cough, and glanced at her sister; the well-acted freemasonry telling on her at once. "Travelling is very improving to the mind and heart, dear Honoria," she suggested, with her head a little on one side—for poor Miss Jane, at forty-five, was sentimental still.

"Under some circumstances—under most circumstances—it doubtless may be so," answered Honoria. "But, dear ladies, my old friends!" with a little burst, "why should I conceal it from you? There has been—there is—a flaw in my married happiness—my husband's confidence"—and here she inclined her face hysterically towards Miss Jane's shoulder. The elder lady sat silent, painfully remembering

there were only two chops, and a pudding made in a saucer, for dinner ; and hoping dear Mademoiselle would not stay very long. Miss Jane searched instantly for her pocket-handkerchief.

“I was never so surprised in my life,” she murmured. On an average, Miss Jane had never been so surprised in her life about eleven times every day. “Young, handsome, rich, a scion of the aristocracy, and——”

“And jealous !” murmured Honoria, in a trembling voice. “Jealous of me, dear Miss Jane, of my past life and my present one ! Oh that we had never gone abroad ! It was hearing me talk in German—which Mr. Bryanstone unhappily doesn’t understand—to an old Austrian officer at the table-d’hôte, which first aroused this dreadful phantom that embitters my life. This is what it is to be half a foreigner ! This is what it is to have married beyond one’s own condition of life !” she exclaimed, passionately.

At this pathetic statement even old Miss Jarvis forgot the mutton-chops, and joined in lamentations with Miss Jane. The idea of Ma-

demoiselle, the staid, gloomy, reserved woman, who had lived under their roof without speaking or seeking to speak to a man for seven years, being suspected of light conduct now! Her past life called in question, too! What a monster of stupid jealousy this husband must be! A past that had been spent exclusively in the society of school-girls, and, since she left their charge, in the care of one invalid old lady!

“But though I tell him all this,” said Honoria, when the sisters had chirped their little duet of wonder and condolence, “though I repeat detail by detail how every day of my life here used to be passed with you, his morbid discontent with me continues the same. I do everything I can to please Mr. Bryanstone, even to gratifying any fancy that he takes respecting my dress or appearance. To-day, knowing that you would like me best as my old self, I have dressed my hair plainly; but generally, dear Miss Jane, will you believe me? I wear it as you see it in old pictures, a mass of little frizzed curls, reaching straight down to my eyebrows.”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed Miss Jane. She

was not ordinarily profane ; but the thought of Mademoiselle's scarlet hair dressed out in such a fashion was too much for her. " It can't become you, dear. I never was so much surprised in my life. Sister, do you hear ? Poor Mademoiselle's husband makes her wear her hair in frizzed curls straight down to her eyebrows ! "

The old lady lifted up her mild little mittened hands two inches at least. " Such is life," she observed, with resignation. " And so end the hopes of all who make their idol of clay. Dear Mrs. Bryanstone, allow me, as an old and tried friend, to enquire where—where have you sought for help in this difficulty ? "

" Well," said Honoria, out of her depth altogether ; " I got a very nice maid at Frankfort, who knew the way of dressing the hair *à la Louis Seize* perfectly, and she prevented me looking such a fright as I did at first ; but still——"

" I don't think you quite understand, dear," interrupted Miss Jane. " Charlotte's allusion was not to things temporal."

"I should think it very likely," cried the old lady, remembering the chops again, and knowing perhaps how apt spiritual conversation is to lengthen out, "very likely indeed that your poor husband is a little insane. Don't you think so, Jane? Doctor Pinniger has told me that the first symptom his own dear wife showed of her disorder was in taking up groundless jealousies and dislikes against him."

"Good old creature!" thought Honoria, the very suggestion I wanted. "I must confess"—this aloud—"that this most fearful thought is not entirely new to me. Mr. Bryanstone's sister is a most extraordinary little person; and old Sir Hyde, with whom we are now staying, is more than eccentric. Still, I hope,—I hope that brighter days are in store for me. This morbid fancy once put aside, I would trust to time for the rest. Now, suppose," she gave one rapid glance at the face of the elder but, as she felt, the sharper woman, "just suppose Mr. Bryanstone should ever come to you for confirmation of his

doubts? There at once might be a means for restoring him to his old peace of mind."

Miss Jane was just beginning to say something gushing, when the old lady by the fire interrupted her somewhat sharply. "Jane, you know very well that we have done with the world, and the world's passions and vanities," she observed. "Husband and wife should settle their own differences, without the help of foolish old women like us. Study to please him, Mrs. Bryanstone, and, unless your husband is absolutely insane, it is impossible that he can continue to keep up this ridiculous suspicion concerning the past. Quite. I never heard of such a thing."

There was an altered tone in her voice; and Honoria rose and put on her hat instantly. She was too thorough an artist to risk over-doing her part by one hair's-breadth.

"Bless you for those words, my kind friend!" she faltered. "They recall me to my duty—to the only source from whence I can look for help. You are right. No one should interfere between husband and wife. I—I—must bear my cross

unaided." Mrs. Bryanstone remembered having seen this metaphor in some good little book of Letty's, and thought it might not be amiss to bring it in now.

"And Jane and I will never cease to remember you with interest," said old Miss Jarvis, rising also, and growing much more hearty now that her uneasiness respecting dinner was being set at rest.

"And if it was in our power to do anything—" hazarded poor Miss Jane.

"If," said Honoria, solemnly, and looking from one to the other of the sisters, "if Mr. Bryanstone should ever come to you unknown to me, and put questions regarding the years I lived with you, I do not even ask what your answer to him would be. I feel it."

She embraced both of the old ladies with hurried agitation; made her way from the house, only too thankful not to encounter Bridget's sharp eyes again; and in another ten minutes had found out a cab-stand, and was on her way back, not altogether dissatisfied with her afternoon's work, to London.

She drove to a hair-dresser's shop in Oxford Street ; was washed back from red to gold ; had the flowing curl upon the shoulder, the Louis Seize coiffure upon the forehead restored ; and then, true to her resolution, went off to dine in Leicester Square. Three years ago, just before she went into Mrs. Forsyth's service, she had had occasion more than once to dine at one of the second-rate French restaurants of that cosmopolitan locality, and to this house she now betook herself. It was between four and five o'clock, and the dining-room into which Mrs. Bryanstone entered was tolerably well filled ; for Leicester Square knows no great difference between June and December.

" I was right to come here," she thought, when her dinner was ordered, and she sat listening to the familiar beloved buzz of French voices around her. " It's a tonic to my moral courage ; it reminds me there's another world (not a bad world either) besides the world I stand in with such precarious footing now. Diable !" she continued to herself, as she raised her veil, and commenced to eat her soup with excellent zest,

"I shall need all my courage soon! By the time I get back to-night the Jarvises may have betrayed me to Bryanstone, and a message already have been telegraphed to Brentwood. Wine, of course," to the garçon. "Château-Margaux, and see that it is of the best. A demi-bouteille of champagne with the dessert. At least," she thought, "I can take my wine like a Christian for once! Not swallow champagne with my meat, like these barbarian islanders. Never mind that my Château-Margaux is vin ordinaire, and my champagne gooseberry. I'd sooner drink it free, and listening to French bagmen's voices round me, than have the best wine from Sir Hyde's cellar, and the starched butler, and the family conclave, and the rest of it. So much for ambition! So much for the prize I worked so hard—put myself at the mercy of a wretch like Lumley—to win!"

Now all the time that Mrs. Bryanstone dined and moralised, a Frenchman, seated somewhat in shadow at the extreme end of the dining-room, never once ceased to watch her

intently. He was not dining ; he did not look as if he had the wherewithal to dine ; a cup of coffee alone was before him on the little marble table ; a foreign newspaper in his hand. The man was young, six or seven and twenty, perhaps, strikingly handsome, and with an air of refinement on his pale face that contrasted singularly with the poverty of his clothes. And this poverty was the most utter poverty of all ; the last squalid vestiges of what had once been luxury. A well-cut frock-coat, threadbare all over, ragged at the cuffs, and tightly buttoned across the place where a shirt should have been, but what was not ; a pair of summer trousers that had made too close acquaintance with the inky London pavements ; varnished boots, in holes ; and a battered cloth hat, pulled down low over its miserable wearer's eyes.

Those eyes, could Honoria have seen them, wore an expression that might have frightened even her, as they watched her in the calm enjoyment of her well-appointed meal. Such sheer animal suffering, such defiant pride, such strange exultation was blent in them as

actually lit up his face, in spite of its entourage of dirt and penury, into a beauty scarcely human.

“ Found again—again ! ” he murmured to himself. “ In velvets and silks, too, and here ! So much for believing in a woman’s death ; so much for being sentimental over a grave in Père-la-Chaise ! Yes, you shall drink your wine ! Yes, you shall eat your food without interruption !—and then—a dessert such as you little expect is before you ! ”

And he rose, coasted stealthily round the room, and placed himself, holding up a newspaper as if reading it at the gas-light, not five paces from Mrs. Bryanstone.

When she had done her salmi of partridges, and the best dessert the house could boast was being placed before her, she ordered some coffee, a little glass of liqueur, and cigarettes. Turkish tobacco, if they had any.

“ And if not, I can supply the deficiency,” said a voice in French close beside her. “ I have some of the old mixture still. Madame—Nita—will you allow me to join you ? ”

Mrs. Bryanstone started round, and as she caught sight of the stranger's face, in spite of all her self-command, a half shriek rose to her lips—

“ Jacques ! ”

END OF PART VII.

PART VIII.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. BRYANSTONE IN AFFLICTION.

FOR one week after she first heard of Henry Bryanstone's marriage, Nelly Bertram had succumbed utterly. Then, the first dull stupefaction of the blow over, had gone back to copying her old self so patiently, day by day, and line by line, that no one in the house ever saw it was only a copy, and that the original—the joyous young existence that used to live and flow on unconscious of itself or of its own happiness—was in its grave for ever.

People are very slow in discovering the counterfeit from the real in this kind of matter. If your household companion, daughter, niece, wife, whatever you will, gets up as usual in the morning, sees to your comfort, is cheerful at your meals, plays your backgammon, or piquet,

with you of an evening, what should make you suspect the part to be an acted one? All Mr. Bertram required was in Nelly still. Her tears, her groans were for her pillow. What should Uncle Frank know of them?

So the autumn passed. Winter came, and froze the wet moors and lanes into iron, and again the ground was dry enough for Nelly to walk in the short, dull twilight along the uplands where she had walked, when summer lay purple on the moors, with Bryanstone. She had not so much time for idling out of doors as she used to have. With premature knowledge, she had learnt that life's one panacea is work; and with no other object save the healing of her own pain, she worked; at her Latin, at her mathematics; when her head was too aching and wearied for these, at her common household duties. I need scarcely tell you that a man of Mr. Bertram's age and position loved eating. During this winter Nelly surpassed herself in preparing new dishes for his table; savoury pies, French ragouts, little omelettes for his supper and breakfast. That she ate none of them her-

self I don't say. She was not at all a woman to hang her head, and fret, and starve, because some man had refused to return her love. She studied her Latin and mathematics; cooked, and ate the savoury pies and ragouts; visited the cottagers; worked at her needle; played backgammon with her uncle, and, as the December days wore on, quite believed that she had lived the old grief down and was healing fast. But she did not gain flesh: and every night before she slept, scalding tears wetted her pillow as freely as they had done a week after Bryanstone's wedding-day.

"You should walk about more, Nelly," said her uncle, one bitter January night, with the wind sobbing, the snow drifting against the parlour window-pane. "I saw Miss Surtees to-day, and she bade me tell you that you have not been once to see her this winter."

"I don't think Miss Surtees cares whether I go to see her or not," answered Nelly. "Whenever we do meet, she does nothing but give me long accounts of her own exploits across country or with her gun, for all of which I care nothing."

"Well, no—how should you?" said Mr. Bertram, complacently. "I've brought you up according to my ideas of what your sex should be, Nelly. I had an idea once—well, never mind, 'twas not at all like Miss Surtees'. An unsexed woman is my horror. Whatever God Almighty may in his wisdom have made woman for, 'twas not to rival men in the hunting-field—*that* their structure plainly shows us; though he would be a rash man indeed who should attempt to define the province for which they were made. But though Miss Surtees is no model for you, she is still a neighbour, child, and to-day she asked for you kindly. Indeed, I believe she said she had a message, a note, or something of the sort to give you."

Nelly's cheeks kindled. "A letter for me, Uncle Frank! are you sure?"

"Well, I think so. Let me see; I met her by Brooks's farm, and she wanted me to turn with her to The Place, and——"

"And my letter, Uncle Frank? Are you sure you don't know whom the letter was from?"

"From? No, child; how should I know

anything about it? If I can throw a quartre ace next time I win the gammon. Yes, I do, though; of course, of course, I remember it all. Who was the young woman you nursed in a fever last summer? We read the marriage afterwards in the paper, you may recollect, to a Mr.—Mr.—he called here once or twice, unless my memory fails me.”

“Is the letter from Mrs. Bryanstone?”

“From her or from her husband. Some accident or other has happened to him, and they wanted to tell you of it, and not remembering our address, enclosed the letter to Miss Surtees—if you were to throw seizes every time you couldn’t save yourself—how many games is it that I have beat you this week?”

That night Nelly did not shed her accustomed tears when she laid her head upon her pillow; but all night long her sleep was broken with dreams—feverish, impossible dreams, all of Bryanstone, all of evil in some form overtaking him, and of her incapacity to help him. At one time she saw him standing before the altar with Miss Forrester, and when the priest began to

charge them both "as they would one day answer at the day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed," the bridegroom turned his head and looked at her. And she tried to speak, and tell him of that midnight meeting she had witnessed with Stretton, but could not; and the ceremony went on, and they were married. And as they passed her, going to the vestry, she dreamed that Bryanstone stooped and asked her why she had not saved him? And then the bride and bridesmaids, and all the crowd of faces in the church, seemed to look and mock at her; and Bryanstone turned away with disgust and hatred, and took his bride into his arms and kissed her. And as their lips touched, the likeness to Miss Forrester seemed to fade away, and a woman with horrible features was in her stead. And then that, too, changed and fell into ashes, and only the bridal dress and veil lay on the ground at Nelly's feet.

This dream, turned and distorted through a dozen different shapes, but still with the same leading incidents for its motive, she dreamed till daybreak. Then, when she had woke up

thoroughly, and reasoned with herself, and gone to sleep again, she dreamed another time. And now she saw Bryanstone, pale and bleeding upon a sofa, with no one near to tend him; and suddenly he held his arms out, and cried, "Nelly!" and she went and fell upon his breast. And from this dream she woke sobbing like a child—what was she better than a child?—who has been frightened in his sleep.

It was a cheerless winter morning, the north wind setting sheer across the marshes, and every now and then bringing up a clinging mist, half rain half sleet, from the sea; but Nelly felt neither cold wind nor clinging mist as she walked along the dark two miles of common that separated the Parsonage from Lowick Place. The intense longing to hear of Bryanstone, to have Bryanstone's letter in her hand, possessed her to such an extent that she was simply insensible to object or idea apart from him; and when she found herself in Miss Surtees' morning room, she was unconscious, for the first time in her life, of either the want of sympathy or the

positive look of freezing contempt on that strong-minded young woman's hard face.

"My uncle says you have a letter for me. I have come for it."

Miss Surtees, who was seated at breakfast before the fire, stretched her hand out to the mantelpiece, took a letter from it, and threw it down upon the table. "You know the contents, I suppose?" she volunteered. "You've heard of his accident?"

"Mr. Bryanstone——" and Nelly's lips blanched.

"He has fought a duel already for that woman you nursed here, and has got shot through the lungs, and now they want you to go and nurse him. What in the world ails you, child? Are you ill?"

"It—it was sudden, Miss Surtees. I'll sit down, please." And Nelly turned away and sank down on the nearest seat—a low ottoman by the window—the very same one where Miss Forrester had *posed* for innocence and family affection on that August morning, eight months ago, when she first got Henry Bryan-

stone to undertake her money business with Stretton.

Miss Surtees looked curiously for a minute at the rigid figure and poor little horror-struck face before her, then turned abruptly away and began to poke the fire vigorously. She was not a bad woman, in the very worst sense of the word; but she really had had scant experience of the accident that commonly makes women soften, and felt as helpless as a man when she was thrown across sentimental sorrow of any kind. Years ago, when she was quite a child, Miss Surtees had herself gone through one solitary love affair, and had come to cruellest grief in it. From that time till the present her heart had been shut against men, hard to women. With the former she hunted, shot, and smoked; with the latter she was uniformly, consistently odious. She would as lief have embroidered bead bags, or presided at Dorcas meetings, as have listened to the detail of any ordinary love story. But somehow, at this moment she did not feel unkind or even impatient towards Nelly. The silent despair, the sudden white horror of the plain

childish face, took the situation altogether out of the regions of young-lady sentimentalism, and brought it down to that common ground of mere physical pain with which few men or women are too hard to sympathise.

"You've got a chill, walking on an empty stomach, child," she remarked, after a minute or two. "Take something hot at once, and the spasm will pass." And she poured out a cup of coffee and pushed it across the table to her guest.

The attention from one ordinarily so pitiless as Miss Surtees smote Nelly's overcharged heart so keenly that she burst into tears. "Do you think there's a chance for him?" she cried, looking up piteously from the three or four blurred lines that constituted Bryanstone's letter. "Do you think any one could be shot through the lungs and recover? Why, it's ten days ago now since it happened," and she rose up wildly. "I must start at once, and go and nurse him. Oh, Miss Surtees!" and she set down the untasted coffee again upon the table; "do you think there's

any chance for him? I'd like you to say the truth."

Miss Surtees was silent. Her own opinion, gathered from the letter she had herself received from Honoria, was that Bryanstone was dying; but she could not—no, for the life of her she could not say so to Nelly. "My cousin, Max Surtees, was shot in the chest from a gun when he was a boy," she remarked, when the girl's eager eyes forced her to speak, "and he recovered, though he's never been very strong since. But then that was a very different thing. Mrs. Bryanstone speaks of inflammation——"

"I see, I understand," and the trembling hands clutched Bryanstone's letter up convulsively to her heart. "I know quite well what you mean. Miss Surtees, how long will it take me to reach Brussels, please? Uncle Frank knows nothing of travelling."

Miss Surtees thought to herself that Uncle Frank would never be fool enough to let his niece start alone to the Continent at this hasty summons, even though it may be the summons of a dying man. However, she abstained from

entering upon any question likely to be provocative of more emotion: and, taking down a foreign Bradshaw from the book-shelf, commenced telling Nelly the particulars of the route.

"I'll write it, please, Miss Surtees, as you make it out, so that I can't mistake in telling Uncle Frank." And then Miss Surtees having furnished her with a card and pencil, Nelly did command herself, and with shaking fingers and blinded eyes, wrote down, in her usual neat little hand, all the necessary details of the journey.

"If—if—when Mr. Bryanstone recovers, I shouldn't advise your stopping with these people," remarked Miss Surtees when they had finished, down to the number of francs between Ostend and Brussels. "I was introduced first to Miss Forrester by Mrs. Hamilton, a woman of no very strict ideas herself, and afterwards she managed to get my father to ask her here with the Haighs, no doubt in pursuit of Bryanstone. I'm the last person to interest myself in any small scandal, but for your own sake, I say, keep clear of her. The fact of her husband

being dragged into a duel about her, shows what stamp of woman she is."

"Can you tell me anything about the duel? It will be Uncle Frank's first question."

"I can read you Mrs. Bryanstone's letter. No, stay, you may take it with you and let him see it." And Miss Surtees produced a letter from the table drawer, gave it to Nelly, shook hands more kindly with her than she had ever done before in her life, and then bade her good-by and take care of herself.

When she was alone, on her road to the Parsonage once more, Miss Bertram drew forth Bryanstone's note and read it again and again, till the scalding tears hid it from her sight. It was blurred and irregular, and consisted of these words: "I'm badly wounded, my dear Nelly, and I believe it will go hard with me. Can you come? I want to see you once more. H. B."

And this was Mrs. Bryanstone's letter:—

"Dear Miss Surtees,—May I ask you to give the enclosed note to your dear young friend, Miss Bertram, whose address I have forgotten? I am in the deepest affliction on account of my beloved

husband, and her presence, if she could come, would be of the utmost comfort to me. About a fortnight ago, dearest Henry left me, in perfect health and spirits, and telling me that he would be absent on a visit of a week or two in London. Imagine my horror a few days later—I was staying at the time with Sir Hyde Bryanstone—on receiving a telegraphic message to say that he had been dangerously wounded *in a duel*! I flew to him at once, and found him, as it seemed to me, at death's door—shot through the right lung. The pretext of the quarrel was something about horses, between him and Mr. Farnham Lumley, I believe at Tattersall's, and it was arranged that they should go over at once to Brussels. They fought, *awful* to say! at twelve paces, with pistols, and were to shoot while one, two, three, (I have learnt this afterwards) was being said. Dearest Henry is an excellent marksman, but that horrid Lumley, they say, fired at the word 'two,' and wounded him. They have extracted the ball this morning; but there is great fear of inflammation setting in, and all I can do, is to kneel silently at

his bedside *and pray* ! What makes my agony greater, is the thought that I am the cause of it. My beloved Henry misconstrued, I believe, some remarks that were made about me by Mr. Lumley in town, and carried away by his too *chivalrous sense of honour*, this deplorable affair is the result. Poor fellow ! in his suffering he remembers with gratitude the kind little girl who, under God's blessing, saved me, and wishes her here to participate in and lighten my attendance. In the deepest affliction,

“ Dear Miss Surtees, sincerely yours,

“ HONORIA BRYANSTONE.

“ P.S. I need scarcely mention that any expense to which Miss Bertram's journey puts her, will rest with me.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE COUNT ST. GEORGES.

MR. BERTRAM fought out the whole proposal, inch by inch, of Nelly's going to Brussels. It was improper for young women to travel alone. The plan was senseless, because Mr. Bryanstone would be either dead or better when she got there. Duels were godless proceedings. What business had the young man to mix himself up in one of them? If he knew there was no truth in the statement made against his wife, he should have treated the falsehood with contempt; if there was truth in it, Mrs. Bryanstone wasn't a fit person to sympathise with. And it was improper for young women to travel alone, and the plan was senseless—and then the same round again and again; with, or without, variations.

“Uncle,” cried Nelly, passionately, when all her small stock of argument was expended, “if Mr. Bryanstone dies without my seeing him, I shall never forgive myself, and never be as I have been again while I live. You can keep me from going, of course, but I say the truth in this. I shall never feel happy again if Mr. Bryanstone dies without my seeing him.”

Her sudden outburst, her distended, tearless eyes did more than all her common-sense pleading had the power to effect. Of her unhappy passion, of the possibility of her even entertaining anything, save friendship, for a married man, it was not in Uncle Frank’s simple heart to dream. She had taken a liking to the Bryanstones from the fact of having nursed the young woman in her fever. Some romantic idea of her presence bringing Mr. Bryanstone through his accident, made her so resolutely bent upon obeying his summons. Perhaps it might be best to let her have her way. An hysterical young woman is always a dangerous creature to oppose. He remembered his sister, Nelly’s mother, and her white face and spiritless, early-

closed life—just because they had made her marry one man instead of another, or some such trifle! What if Nelly should be the same? What if Bryanstone should die without her seeing him, and she should indeed, as she had said, never be the same again?

“’Tis the first time in your life I’ve known you thoroughly unreasonable, child,” he remarked, not without temper, when he had finally given way. “You have always hitherto shown the capacity, at least, to sit down and reason a thing out, as well as though Providence, in its mercy, had made you a boy. But it would be too much, it would be expecting far too much, now that you are a woman grown, to see you consistent still! *I* invite your Aunt Lydia to keep my house?” This was in answer to a former suggestion of Nelly’s. “I thank you, I thank you very much indeed, for your consideration, but prefer being alone. For a fortnight, at least, I will be undisturbed by women, and by women’s fancies.”

And in the portion of his sermon which he wrote that night, he commended St. Paul’s

wisdom with warmth ; and not only as a priest, but as a man and a brother, advised such of his hearers as were yet unmarried, to abide even as he was. But this verse of Corinthians was at all times a favourite text of the Vicar of Lowick.

On the evening of the second day after leaving home, Nelly found herself driving through the streets of Brussels. She had not stopped to rest since she quitted her uncle's house. Straight on with feverish haste, and only as much sleep as she could snatch upon the road, she had obeyed Bryanstone's summons. What if with all her haste she should be too late ? What if alien tongues, if cold untroubled faces, should break that awful news to her ? If all her reward should be to kneel beside a silent bed, and press her lips upon a cold, unanswering hand ?

During the tedious hours of her journey imagination had painted her arrival in a hundred different ways ; but in each picture Bryanstone had been able to speak to her, to take her hand in his, to show consciousness, in some way, of

her coming. It was only now that she was actually close to him, in the same city that he lay, that the darkest, perhaps the most natural, foreboding of all came into her mind. And, worn with fatigue and fasting, her courage did at last give way, and she cried—cried like a heart-broken child—all the way from the railway terminus to the remote quarter of Brussels in which the Bryanstones were living. Anything more forlorn it would be hard to imagine than Nelly's whole appearance when, with travel-worn dress and tear-stained, death-like face, she was ushered, on her arrival at the hotel, into Mrs. Bryanstone's presence.

And Mrs. Bryanstone was drest for dinner—drest, flushed, animated, as if to render the contrast the more cruel! Nelly had imagined—Heaven knows what she had imagined!—a wife kneeling pale and awe-struck, perhaps, by her husband's side, in a dim-lighted chamber; a woman worn with remorse for the awful fate of which she, however innocent, had been the hapless cause. She was shown into a room brilliant with soft light, and warm with the ruddy blaze

of a well-heaped wood fire ; a room hung—as the state rooms of foreign hotels are—with crimson and white ; with brackets of ormolu gleaming among the drapery ; with looking-glass from ceiling to floor wherever looking-glass could be placed ; with a round table drawn up before the fire, and at this moment holding a goodly supply of fruit and wines ; and with two persons, one Mrs. Bryanstone, the other an unusually handsome Frenchman of about seven or eight-and-twenty, in the full enjoyment of a convivial tête-à-tête.

Honorina was looking superb. Nelly's first thought—yes, before she thought of Bryanstone—was of this woman's beauty. She was in a dress of brilliant smalt-blue silk ; the body cut high upon the shoulders, low in front, and trimmed round the bosom and sleeves with the finest Mechlin lace. On one white arm was a single coil of yellow Indian gold ; a delicate necklace of the same hue and workmanship set off the dazzling whiteness of her perfect neck. Had Mrs. Bryanstone only acquired new science in making her face up, or had nature indeed

lavished more charms upon her in the last six months? Probably the former. But in this friendly light, what mattered it if Dew of Sahara and Sultana salve, if henna and belladonna had played their part in that radiant complexion and those melting eyes, if copper-filings had increased the gold of that cloud of supple, silky hair or not? The picture, whether painted by the master-hand or by her own, was a beautiful one—beautiful with luscious colouring, with flowing lines, with Mechlin lace, with a smalt-blue silk, with Indian gold!—and remember, Nelly knew nothing about meretricious art or Madame Rachel, also that she had come out of the cold and darkness of the wintry streets, and was looking with blinded, jealous, dazzled eyes, at the woman who had stolen her love away from her!

“Am I—am I expected?” she stammered, standing like stone at the open door, and with her small chétif face looking literally all eyes in its bewilderment and misery.

“Dear Miss Bertram!” exclaimed Honoria, jumping up, and her face assuming the right

expression in an instant. "*Dear* Nelly! So good, so very good of you! Sit down by the fire—your hands are frozen," seizing both of them within her own, "and let me get you something. A cup of hot tea would be the very best thing for you to take after your journey."

"Is Mr. Bryanstone better?" said Nelly, when she had allowed herself to be led up to the fire. "But I need hardly ask!" And she glanced at Mrs. Bryanstone's guest, who, with that mingled air of deference and easy good-nature which distinguishes foreigners from ourselves in all the small situations of life, had quietly arranged a chair and footstool for her by the fireside, and now stood looking at her face as though her condition after her journey was really a matter of positive personal interest to himself.

Mrs. Bryanstone clasped her hands and cast her eyes up to the ceiling, on which was painted a very florid representation of Rubens-like loves and graces. "Thank Heaven!" she murmured, after invoking these deities for a minute

in silence,—“thank Heaven, I may say that the worst is over! This afternoon the doctor pronounced him out of danger. But you must expect to see him changed, dear Miss Bertram, changed, and oh, how fearfully—fearfully weak!”

She made a demonstration of a sob; then thought the better of it—influenced, I doubt not, by a certain look in dear Miss Bertram’s eyes, and rang the bell instead, to give orders for Nelly’s tea.

“And when am I to see him?” the girl asked wistfully. “Does he ask for me still? Would he wish to see me to-night?”

“Well, what do you think, Count?” said Mrs. Bryanstone, addressing the Frenchman. “You saw Doctor Véron just before dinner, and heard what he said. Do you think it would be running any risk to tell Henry that Miss Bertram has arrived?”

The gentleman thus addressed thought there would be not only no risk in doing so, but great benefit to the patient. The only name, as he understood, that Mr. Bryanstone had yet mentioned was Mademoiselle’s—the only subject

that had had power to interest him had been the probability of her arrival to-night.

He looked politely towards Nelly while he spoke ; and then Mrs. Bryanstone recollected to introduce her two young friends. "The Count St. Georges, Miss Bertram.

"The Count is an old friend, an old childish playfellow, indeed, of mine," she explained, looking into the fire as she spoke, "and, by a perfect providence, happened to be in Brussels now. He has done everything for me—put my poor Henry into the hands of the best doctors, managed the horrible police affair—everything !"

But Miss Bertram had no interest in the Count or his old acquaintance with Honoria. "You do think Mr. Bryanstone will be able to see me to-night?" she recommenced curtly, after swallowing her tea and listening to a good deal more of well-done sentiment about my poor dear Henry. "May I go to him at once?"

Mrs. Bryanstone rang again, and desired the foreign servant, who answered the bell, to send Mr. Bryanstone's valet to the dining-room.

"When you are once in Martin's hands, Nelly

dear, I shall feel that I have nothing more to do with you," she remarked playfully. "Martin regards his master as his own especial personal property, and everybody else who cares for him, me in particular, as interlopers. If I offer to give the poor fellow his medicine or drink, Martin takes the glass out of my hand and looks at me as if I was a Lucretia Borgia, at the least. It will be well if he does not treat you in the same way."

Before she had finished speaking the door opened noiselessly, and a grave, middle-aged, and unmistakably British man-servant appeared.

"Mr. Bryanstone is ready to see Miss Bertram," he announced, much in the same tone in which the familiars, attired as butlers, summon expectant martyrs to the dentist's inner place of torture. "Mr. Bryanstone would be glad to see Miss Bertram at once." And then, without another word, he signed to Nelly, whose heart beat as fast as any martyr's in any faith, to follow him, and marshalled her along winding passages and up innumerable stairs to quite a distant part of the vast hotel.

"Miss Bertram, if you please," he remarked, when he had stopped before a door which Nelly's quickened pulse told her was that of Bryanstone's room, "I want to say a word to you."

She only looked her answer; for, indeed, just at that moment she could not bring her lips to speak.

"Mr. Bryanstone is very ill indeed, miss. *They* make light of it;" indicating whom "they" meant by a contemptuous glance down the staircase they had just ascended, "and say the worst's over, and all the rest of it. But he's very ill, miss, and the doctors—for all they're foreigners—say so too. And he can't bear excitement, nor rustling silks, nor chatter of no kind, and that's why I've got him to this room, quiet and away from Mrs. Bryanstone's apartments. I hope you won't take my meaning different to what it's meant, but I speak for my master's good. With the wound as it is now, a sudden excitement of any kind might be the death of him."

As Nelly listened to the man's funereal voice, her face got whiter, if that indeed were possible,

than it had been before. "I understand you perfectly," she answered. "You are right to tell me, and you needn't fear that I shall excite Mr. Bryanstone."

Then, with trembling hands, she took off her hat and cloak, smoothed back the hair from her forehead, paused one moment to try and stop the desperate beat of her own heart, and silently followed Martin into his master's room.

CHAPTER XIII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"No, no, no. You don't understand English-women," said Mrs. Bryanstone. "No foreigner can. She will simply act out the part with Henry that I intend her to do, and then I shall send her back."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders, but looked thoroughly unconvinced. "You probably don't think her in love with him?" he remarked, laconically. "I do. No woman ever looked as that girl did when she asked for your husband unless she was in love, or, which is worse, believed herself to be so. Les Miss Anglaises are human creatures, I suppose, with all their virtues?"

"Well, yes," answered Honoria, coolly; "human creatures, certainly, but with a differ-

ence, with a great difference, Jacques. Not such human creatures, at all events, as you've had anything to do with. This girl, now, has principles—oh, you may smile, but there *is* such a thing, mind, as ultra-scepticism—fixed principles in a whole heap of things,—religion, honour, domestic affections, and a great deal besides. I know the whole list of ruling motives such people have, and instead of sneering at them like you, I use my sense, and say these things are. Let me make the best of them. That girl knew enough to damage me with Bryanstone before my marriage, and held her tongue. Why? Because she was over head and ears in love with him herself, and the principles ticketed 'delicacy' and 'self-respect' prevented her from injuring her rival."

The Count adjusted one of the fire-logs with the heel of his exquisitely-fitting laced boot, stroked down his moustache, and smiled,—but with his eyes only. He had an enormous respect for Honoria's ability as long as she kept down to his level; but his mind, praiseworthy as was its capacity for all commonplace

villany, had not in reality a tenth part of the scope of hers, and the moment she got above him he sneered at her want of sense,—as many other men are apt to do at women cleverer than themselves. Honoria could take a character, recognise its honour and its virtue frankly, and work upon them for her own advantage. He could recognise the existence neither of honour nor of virtue, and so was immeasurably more limited in the use to which he could put their possessors.

“Nita,” he exclaimed, after a moment or two—in French, of course—“let us put sentiment quite aside, and look at plain facts as if we were mere curious spectators of the scene. Here you have”—he lowered his voice and looked full at her unblenching face—“an adventuress who, by the extraordinary whim of one old woman of fashion, has risen—we speak as ‘respectable’ people speak—from one of the very lowest walks of life into the society of church-going, and, what is more, of well-born and well-to-do men and women. Her protectress—mistress—whatever you choose to call

her—dies, leaving her the sum of two thousand pounds, with which capital this woman—this adventuress—keeps herself still afloat in London society, biding her time till she can make some new fool her prey. The fool comes. She meets a man who is—well, sufficiently in love to want to make her his wife, allures him on almost to the point, then loses her hold of him, some rumours of the past having unfortunately penetrated into the refined circles where she moves. After a time this woman meets her prey again. By playing the last, most desperate stroke of all, flinging herself at his feet at the door of his own house (if I understood that part of the story right), she marries him. Well, what follows? Before six months are over, a hundred dear friends have whispered into the husband's ear suspicions of his wife's past life. Before six months are over, he has—possessing, we will assume, more sensibility than sense—fought a duel and got desperately wounded in his defence of her honour. Now comes the point. The wife does not believe her beloved Henry will die, and with reason; for she has had satis-

factory assurances from the first surgeons in Europe on the point: but she has another, if I mistake not, a deeper anxiety. The husband will live and mistrust her! Certain words, certain gestures of the wounded man have told her *that*, as clearly as a woman of her ability needs to be told anything. What will be his course of conduct when he recovers? Will he indeed inquire into that dark past, and see what materials for a divorce its history unfolds, or will he separate from her silently and without the help of law? allowing her his tarnished name and a certain number of hundreds a year for her portion. She knows nothing of this. She waits patiently, day by day, and not trusted sufficiently by her husband's own valet to offer a cup of water to his lips——”

“Jacques!” cried Honoria, starting up in one of the moments of passion that were so rare to her, and being rare, so intense while they lasted. “Don’t go too far! Don’t dare look in my face and say too many of these infamies! You’d better not! Men don’t get on well who say infamies of me, my little

Jacques! Do you remember Molinos? and Bernadin? and young De Loulay?"

The Frenchman looked quietly into the fire for a minute or two, then took out a cigar-case from his pocket, selected one of its contents, and bit its end off with his little white square teeth.

"I remember them all quite well," he answered, with a smile. "Molinos and De Loulay you got murdered in duels. The other, Bernadin, you sold to the police. Well, the first two were lads, both of them fellows with hearts on their sleeves when they first met you, free-tongued concerning you after they had been ruined. I'm nothing of that kind, you know, am I?" and he leant his arm upon the mantelpiece, and resting his head upon it, gazed placidly, almost affectionately, into her face.

They were a beautiful picture so. I don't speak here about their moral deformities. I mean outwardly and artistically. Honoria in her shining silk, and Mechlin lace, and yellow Indian gold, and with the firelight flashing on

her auburn hair and heaving breast ; the Frenchman leaning with indolent grace against the crimson velvet mantelpiece, looking at her with his mocking smile, and carelessly playing with the unlighted cigar in his left hand. By madame's kind permission he was not *en toilette*, and his black velveteen morning suit admirably set off his clear-cut oval face and chestnut beard and hair. Giorgione or Titian might have painted them as they stood, in this voluptuous wax-light, and with the curtained room, and costly wines and fruits upon the table, as accessories, and I don't think the critic among us all who talks most about beauty in art being the outward manifestation of beauty hidden in the soul, would have cavilled at the picture.

"I'm like neither of those two lads you put out of the way," the Count proceeded, calmly. "Still less am I like Bernadin, who was connected to you, madame, by nearer and dearer ties than any with which I can ever hope to be bound, and instead of saying infamies of you, I say truths to you. You look so handsome

when you lose your temper, Nita, that I only wonder you do it so rarely ; but the present is really quite an ill-chosen time for trying the effect. In the first place, no new expression could make me think you handsomer than I already do ; in the second—my poor little Nita ! why should we quarrel ? What object could I have in injuring you ? Have I not your interests at heart to an extent which I might almost say makes them my interests too ? ”

She sat down again without a word, and looked sullenly away from him. In alluding to the mistrust of her husband’s servant, the Frenchman had, knowingly, touched—shall I say her heart ? shall I say her conscience ?—well, had touched what to herself passed for self-respect, in its sorest part. She would not have injured a hair of Bryanstone’s head. She wanted Bryanstone to live. To be suspected of the senseless crime of injuring the man who gave her money, name, reputation, stirred in her a sense of actual passionate injustice, such as it was very rare for her contained cold, temperament to sustain. But

the Count St. Georges was right. What good for them to quarrel? What good for her to show temper to *him*? She sat down sullenly, as I have said, and after studying her downcast face keenly for a minute or two, the Count proceeded:

“ We won’t dwell upon unpleasant details, Nita. We’ll finish, in a few words, the scene at which you and I are looking as ‘impartial spectators. The husband lies in a precarious condition, certainly, but convalescent. A few weeks at most, say two of the best surgeons in Europe, and he will be abroad again, fit to think, fit to act. At this juncture, when all her future life hangs upon her retaining her power over her husband (whom in her soul she suspects of not believing in her), what does the woman in whom we are interested do? Writes to England for a former rival, an old friend, love, mistress—*que sais-je?*—of the husband, and makes over the place in the sick room that should be hers exclusively to this stranger! So much of the little drama is all that we can at present see; but it needs no great acuteness, no great acuteness, by ——!” cried the Count, waxing earnest, “ to foretell the

end. Mr. Bryanstone has been set upon the right track, and if a link is wanting in the chain of evidence, if a doubt in your favour yet lingers in his mind, this woman will supply the one and destroy the other, as only a woman can. When you told me you had written for a friend, I expected to see an aunt, a mother, a partisan of yours at least; instead of that arrives a girl of eighteen, not pretty, but none the less dangerous for that; a girl of eighteen over head and ears in love with your husband, and hating and suspecting you like the devil. You've overshoot the mark, madame, as you will find before very long!" And he lit his cigar and began to smoke it with short, vindictive, unenjoyed puffs, which told Honoria, more than his words did, how much he was in earnest.

"And I answer, as I did at first, no. You know nothing of Englishwomen generally, or of this one in particular," she remarked, in her usual placid tone. "If the girl had wanted to injure me with Bryanstone, she would have done it already, by repeating either the details of a conversation of mine and Stretton's that she

chanced to overhear once, or some of the things which, as she did not fail to inform me, I let fall concerning my old life during my fever. Having been silent then, she will be silent now ; more than silent, she'll think it a point of honour, while she lives under my roof, to lessen any breach that may exist between Bryanstone and me. I see the expression of your face, and I know what you think, but you may allow, at least, that I have also acted as I was obliged to act. I've told you, have I not, the reception Bryanstone gave me when I arrived? He wasn't able to speak then, but the excited sort of horror he fell into whenever I entered his room was so great, that the doctors said they would not answer for the case if it was repeated—softening it off, of course," Mrs. Bryanstone added, laughing, " by saying that sick people often took those morbid dislikes of those they loved, *et cetera*. Well, two or three days later, he made them understand he wanted to write. When he had with difficulty written three or four indistinct lines, begging this girl Nelly to come here, I was sent for. He put the note into my hand,

and when I had read it, asked me, in spite of the surgeons' injunctions to silence, if I would address it for him, as he had forgotten the name of the village where she lived. I promised, not only to address it, but to add a letter of my own to one of her friends, imploring that she might be sent, and I did so. Could I do otherwise?"

The Frenchman looked as if he did not see the necessity.

"You must remember one thing, Jacques," she went on in her clear concise manner, "I don't want Mr. Bryanstone to die. You understand that perfectly?"

"I do. The chance of succeeding to the title, and of being found out! sooner than the certainty of a good provision, and bearing the plain name of Mrs. Bryanstone, now. It is like you, Nita. You always flew at the biggest game—no matter what risk you ran."

"And hitherto have not failed to bring it down," she added. "We needn't talk of all that now! Knowing that my wish is for Bryanstone's recovery, can you say I acted ill in asking

this girl? The doctors said he was to be irritated in nothing; and you know as well as I do how he's been chafing and fretting about her non-arrival."

"All that is nothing—a sick man's fancy, nothing more. The real danger for you will be in this girl's power over him as he recovers. If you had only an ordinary woman's heart, an ordinary woman's jealousy, you would see the risk better than you do, with all your sharp brains, my poor Nita! You are standing on the brink of a volcano!"

"On the brink of it!" She rose, and laid her steady hand upon the young man's arm. "Jacques, to another woman those words might convey a sense of danger or fear: to me they are nothing. On the *brink* of a volcano! On what else have my feet trod during the last three years? Have I ever known a day, an hour, in which detection in some shape was not hovering, now distant, now near, before my sight? Since I married Bryanstone, have I ever risen in the morning without thinking that before night I might be discovered, dishonoured,

turned out of his house? While you live, while Stretton lives, while I live myself, can I ever say that I am for an hour safe? Stretton I may some day be unable to buy off. You," her voice for a moment seemed to tremble, "Jacques, may think it to your interest to betray me! I may have fever again, and betray myself, as I so nearly did before. And even beyond these nearer chances, there are other people whom I have forgotten (Farnham Lumley even, if this first lesson has not been strong enough to ensure his silence) who may turn up any day and recognise me. I've looked straight at all this for years, and the result of it is, that I never feel more afraid at one time than at another. I'm getting to believe in fate, I think. Mr. Bryanstone's present temper seems an ominous one, but I've been in worse passes than this, and got well through them all. And discovery can come but once; and do you know, Jacques, sometimes—to-night, for instance—when I feel out of sorts, or down on my luck in any way, I think I'll be just as well off when it does come! I ask myself whether the game *is* worth the

candle. Respectability is a nice thing, and position is good, and money better than either, but I'm not sure I wasn't happier, hard work and starvation and all, in the old, old days when you and I were children together, Jacques. Do you remember how we used to keep St. Catherine's day? Do you remember how we held our ball—poor hungry little wretches that we were! during the first act of 'Robert'? A ball in a room fifteen feet square, and with one cracked violin for orchestra! We'd never more than twenty sous between us, you and I, and when the grown men and women stood drinking their punch and eating their galettes, all we could get was a few roasted chestnuts, or a glass of cassis and a brioche. But after the rest were gone, we used to 'collect'—don't you remember?—grobe about under the table for whatever other people had thrown away as uneatable—apple peelings, burnt bits of galette, orange peel, bad nuts; and I used to keep them in my pocket, Jacques (for you couldn't be trusted), till the next Sunday we could get away beyond the barrier to anything that we

called 'country,' and then we used to sit down and bring out each a piece of dry bread, and I the 'collection,' and think it a fête! How clear it all rises before me at this moment!"

And she turned from him something like actual emotion on her face.

The Frenchman's manner remained coolly indifferent as ever; but his dark eyes followed her keenly, jealously, suspiciously, from beneath their long lashes. His intention of utilising Nelly's good faith he could, to a certain extent, believe in, even while he laughed at the existence of the good faith itself. But what did it portend to him, St. Georges, when Mrs. Bryanstone poséed for sentiment? What plot to silence his lips was brooding when she could thus speak tenderly of old times, calmly of the possibility of discovery? He thought of her manner to Molinos, and to young De Loulay upon the eve of each of *their* betrayals!

"Your recollections of the past do your heart credit, ma petite Nita," he remarked indifferently. "I honour you for speaking of a

poverty most women would wish forgotten. For the rest, you certainly do well always to stand prepared for the worst. As you say, any day may bring up some unexpected witness against you. It is not perfectly certain, is it? that Bernadin, even, is dead."

Her lips quivered for a moment; and a moment only. "Bernadin knows no more than Stretton, or than you," she said, looking unfalteringly into his face. "As long as one of you lives it doesn't matter to me about the rest. And Bernadin, or Stretton, or you, may each do his worst when he will!" she added after a moment. "I don't know what fear is, Jaques! It would be well for some men if they could say the same!"

The Count was no coward. In that she wronged him. But a cold, instinctive shudder did, nevertheless, come across him as he walked away from the hotel, and recollected the expression of Mrs. Bryanstone's eyes as he had twice seen them that night. Once when she threatened him, once when she softened over the past.

He knew both those expressions well. Whenever that woman grew passionate or tender, some man's ruin was in active preparation.

Whose was it now ?


CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE TRACK.

“DRAW the blind higher—I can bear any quantity of light now—and come and sit by me, so. It’s almost worth being ill to be allowed to talk again, and sit so peacefully in the sunshine with you, Nelly.”

And Bryanstone held out a hand, so white, so wasted, that it was not in her heart to refuse to take it, to his little nurse.

She had been his nurse for six weeks now. He had had two serious relapses since the night of Miss Bertram’s arrival, and only during the last ten days had progressed so steadily as to set his attendant’s fears thoroughly at rest. During these six weeks Nelly had waited upon him constantly—waited upon him with the untiring strength, the perfect tact, the exquisite patience



that only great love teaches; and now—now was her reward! Bryanstone was saved; and she, when another few days were over, would return to her own rightful, legitimate duties, and leave him to the possession of Honoria.

Do you wonder her face was thinner and whiter than ever? Do you wonder that even amidst the exquisite pleasure of sitting beside him once more in the sunshine, her eyes would fill with furtive, foolish tears, as she tried hard to talk to him cheerfully about himself, and about his prospects of returning health?

“You have made more progress in the last two days than in all the six weeks before,” she remarked, going through a little pantomime of feeling his pulse, in order to be able to take her hand from his afterwards. “Honoria and I were saying so this morning.”

“Oh!” and Bryanstone’s face darkened. “Honoria discusses my state with you, does she? She knows a great deal about it, I should think.”

“Honoria watches you much more than you know of,” said Nelly, quickly. “A dozen times

a day I have found her standing patiently at the door, waiting to hear if we saw any change for the better. A dozen times she has come and watched by you when you slept, or were unconscious of her presence. I like Honoria as much and as little as ever, Mr. Bryanstone; but I won't be unjust to her. She has not been indifferent to your recovery. That she hasn't been with you more rests with yourself, you know. You never wanted to have her near you."

For a minute a flush rose up over Bryanstone's pale face, and the stern lines, never absent at any time, about his mouth and jaw, deepened. Then he remarked—Nelly thought with somewhat affected carelessness—"Oh, Mrs. Bryanstone's place is not in a sick-room. The first time she came in to see me she overturned a table, two chairs, and all the medicine-bottles, with her expanse of gorgeous silk; and I vowed inwardly that she shouldn't approach me again. Nelly"—looking into her face—"Heaven meant you for a nurse. My instinct was not at fault when I longed so feverishly to have you with

me. When I was at my worst you touched me as lightly as you would have touched a wounded bird, and yet with a firm calm hold, that gave me an infinite sense of support and tenderness at once. Do you wear habiliments like other women? I suppose so. I see no difference between your appearance and theirs; and yet you never overturn furniture or sweep papers and letters out of one's reach, as they do. You are always the same—gentle, patient, firm, enduring. What a happy man Uncle Frank ought to be.”

The blood rushed to Nelly's heart. She was not worldly-wise enough to think—“It is very easy for Mr. Bryanstone to pay Miss Bertram fine compliments now! When it was in his power to have her, to rob Uncle Frank of the priceless treasure, he did not do it. He chose Miss Forrester.” She only thought how good it was to be with him, to hear him acknowledge her poor services, to see his eyes fixed with that look of tender gratitude upon his face. Nothing tones down a very young girl's passion into apparent friendship, like nursing the man

she loves in illness. Of course it is there, ready to break out with all the old strength again hereafter ; but for the time the sense of utter weakness on his side, of protection on hers : the perfect, unquestioned familiarity, the constant companionship, have done away all the old reserve, and doubt, and mystery, which, to unsophisticated young women, is the very food of love. In her constant attendance by day, in her long watches by night, in her anxiety, in her thankfulness, Nelly had almost forgotten the kind of way in which she had once loved Bryanstone. He was her care, her possession, her weak, pain-struck, often querulous patient. No longer the enshrined divinity she had once made of him. No longer the object of hopeless, despairing worship, to which, ever since his marriage, her foolish heart had been faithful.

“ Uncle Frank is a very discontented man just at present, Mr. Bryanstone. He cannot at all see why I ought to be here, nursing you, instead of making his tea. And he is right,” with a stifled sigh. “ Next week I must go home again. You are convalescent. You

will do just as well without with as me now."

"Nelly, I shall do very badly without you."

"I hope—I believe not, sir. Monsieur Véron says he has not the faintest fear of another relapse."

"Oh, I don't mean bodily," said Bryanstone, with the unmistakable impatience of a sick man. "I mean mentally, *really*. Nelly, look at me. You didn't see me till after my accident, and you think, I dare say, that all the lines you see on my face, all the grey hairs on my head," and he passed his thin hand through his hair, which was indeed fast turning from the glossy black Nelly remembered to iron-grey, "have sprung from illness alone. No such thing. I was an utterly changed man before—changed, embittered, and so nearly desperate as to be drawn into fighting this accursed duel, a folly which I would once have sworn fifty worthless women should not have forced me to commit! Poor little girl," he broke off, in answer to the scared look of her face, "what should I talk of these things to you for? What do you know of them?"

You have nursed me beautifully, Nelly. You shall go back to Uncle Frank. What right have I to try and keep you ? ”

“ Mr. Bryanstone, I’d do anything I could for you. If you and Honoria really wish it, I will stay longer.”

“ Honoria ! ” exclaimed Bryanstone between his set teeth, and in a tone that made any further comment needless. “ If Honoria wanted you to stay, for that very reason I would bid you go. Our—no, I won’t use the word—her roof and mine isn’t a fit shelter for a child like you. You shall go, and she and I will live out our life, together or apart, as best we can.”

He folded his arms across his chest, and with hard-set lips sat and watched the cold pink clouds as they floated slowly across the ice-blue winter sky. “ Do you remember the last evening you walked with me in the garden of Lowick Place ? ” he said at last. “ It was the day her fever turned.”

Yes ; Nelly remembered the time he spoke of very well.

“ I had a strange sort of fore-knowledge of

what I was going to do that evening, Nelly. Not by reason, of course, or I should have kept out of it, but by instinct. I knew that a fair and modest English violet was within my reach, and I did not gather it! I chose instead a flaunting exotic, without odour, without beauty, beyond the outward beauty that makes the senses drunk for a week; and now I reap the bitter fruits of my choice!"

"Mr. Bryanstone," said Nelly, simply, "I don't wonder at your choice. It's very kind of you to compare me to a violet, or to anything that's pretty; but in plain fact I was, as I am now, an ugly, unmannered country girl, while Honoria——"

"Honoriam!" interrupted Bryanstone, hotly. "Don't you try to say what Honoria is, for you don't know; nor indeed, for the matter of that, do I! We will leave the discussion of her virtues alone; but I'll tell you a little, Nelly, of what my position as her husband is. Imagine a vain sensitive man, who has been horribly and recently disfigured by small-pox. Out of pity, no mirror has been brought to his room as yet."

All that he knows for certain of his misfortune he gleans from the pitying shuddering looks of his old friends, when they come to visit him ; and still, with the desperate fatuity—call it by its true name, rather—with the desperate cowardice of human nature—he delays day by day to look at himself straight in a glass, and know the worst. If the horrible shock to self-love *must* come in the end, let it be staved off, he thinks, only another day, only another hour. Let him think of himself as he was when he was like other men. Nelly, that pleasant simile not unaptly sets forth what my life has become to me.”

“ I don’t understand you,” said Nelly, looking at him with wistful pitying eyes. “ I am very stupid at guessing the meaning of such things.”

“ Understand ! No ; how should you ? Poor little girl, what do you know of the very air I draw my daily breath in ? Would you like to know anything of it, do you think ? ” He went on presently, “ When you are learning your Greek and Latin of a summer’s morning at home, will it make your quiet studies more

tasteful, by contrast, to know that you have once read one living page out of the dark book called life?"

"I should like to know everything about you, sir. Insignificant though I am, I might be able in some way to lessen your burthen to you, perhaps."

"Not very likely that, Nelly. It's a burthen for life, none the less hard to bear because self-imposed; but I think it would relieve me somewhat to talk to you awhile about myself. Do you know you are very near to me, Nelly, my little friend? Nearer than mother, sister, or any woman I've thought I loved has ever been? I told you that once before, did I not?"


"You did, Mr. Bryanstone, on that evening when it was first evident to me you were going to marry Miss Forrester."

"Ah, you are right; you are sensible, Nelly, when you speak in that tone. You recal to me exactly the position in which I stand to you and to her. I can give you a sketch of my married happiness quite calmly now. The evening when it was first evident to you I would marry Miss

Forrester—I never saw anything of you after that evening, you know—you went away from Lowick Place next day. What a fine evening it was, Miss Nelly. Do you remember? You stayed with me there in the twilight till——”

“Yes, I remember all about it,” interrupted Nelly, who was just beginning to remember also that Bryanstone was a sick man no longer. “It belongs to a bygone time, and one there’s no use in our recalling now. I would rather not talk about myself or the old time in Norfolk at all, please.”

“Very well. We will talk of me and of my bride, instead, Nelly. In the first months of my marriage I was not acutely miserable—mind that; not acutely. That she did not interest me—that we had not a thought or a feeling in common—that, physically and mentally alike, we were unsympathetic, were not sufficient causes to render me so. I don’t say what I might be now, but when I married her I really was not the sort of man whose happiness depends upon domestic congeniality. I’ve never been much accustomed to women’s society. That my



wife should have cared for balls and operas, and running about after titled people, would rather have suited me, so long as she left me in peace to follow my own pursuits. All men who pass thirty unmarried are apt to be the same," Bryanstone remarked, in answer to the expression which this frightful avowal called forth on Nelly's face, "and Honoria had quite tact enough to suit herself to my habits. As far as character goes, we could probably have got on as well as ninety-nine husbands and wives out of a hundred get on (that is, not at all," he added, in a grim parenthesis), "had not far graver doubts than the common one of whether we suited each other or not been suddenly forced upon my mind.

"I believe I must have mentioned my uncle, Sir Hyde Bryanstone, to you, Nelly—my uncle of sixty-five, who is a younger man than I am, and *au courant* of every public, and almost every private, individual's history in Europe. He has been living chiefly at home, in Somersetshire, nursing his gout during the last year, and had never been introduced to Honoria till I took her there, in December last, for a bridal visit.

was going to say he had never seen Honoria; but that takes away the point of the story. Sir Hyde Bryanstone swore—swears now, that he knew her face perfectly. Her face? nay!” cried out Bryanstone, fiercely, “as I’m telling it at all, why do I compromise?—that he knew the very gesture of her hands, the very turn of her neck, the very trick of the smile that had once been part of her profession! On the first day of our arrival, my uncle had the goodness to inform me, as I and my brother-in-law sat alone with him after dinner, that I had married a ballet-dancer. He did not care how I got introduced to Miss Forrester, or what her history was, or who would vouch for her. He knew, he would swear, that he had seen that woman dance at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, in Paris, during the year fifty ——; eight years, that is to say, before she became my wife. Of the name under which she was introduced to me he had never heard. The name under which the woman who had just left his table used to dance in Paris was ‘Nita.’ He would swear to it.”

A cold shudder passed through Nelly Bertram's heart. "Nita" was the name that Stretton had, more than once, called Honoria by during that midnight conversation, every word of which she remembered still. In her delirium had she not talked of herself now as crowned with flowers, now surrounded with applauding faces, now hissed by a thousand cruel voices from some scene where she had once been triumphant? "How did you act?" she stammered. "You gave Honoria the chance of defending herself, and it was explained? Some accidental resemblance ——"

"Nelly," interrupted Bryanstone, gravely, "I am not a man to resort to such half-measures as putting a woman on her own defence—above all, a woman like Honoria—in a matter such as this. I thanked my uncle with tolerable temper for his information, and that night No, child, no!" he interrupted himself, turning his face away from her. "This part of the story is not for you. It can be made plain enough without that darkest link of all in my suspicions. The next morning I started for London, leaving

Honorina to visit some people she said she knew at Reading on the road.

“I don’t know whether she suspected anything from my abrupt departure. I don’t enter, or attempt to enter, into her thoughts, any more than I attempt to judge her by her looks or words now! She talked a good deal as we travelled up from Somersetshire of her old girlish days—not a usual subject with her—especially of her long, wearying years of work, as governess in a school, before she became the companion of Mrs. Forsyth. From the time she was sixteen until she was twenty-three; seven monotonous years—including, mark, the precise date of which Sir Hyde had spoken—she had scarcely once been out, save to church, scarcely seen a carriage, save the doctor’s. What would the dear old Misses Jarvis say now at seeing her a fine lady, and the possessor of all the carriages and horses that her dear Henry—this was addressed to my brother-in-law, who travelled with us—was going to give her, *et cetera*.

“I listened, Nelly, and answered nothing. Monstrous as Sir Hyde Bryanstone’s assertion

might seem, his own intense conviction of its truth had influenced me more than I dared to acknowledge to myself. If it had been a lighter charge, I might possibly have taken it differently; but the very magnitude of the dishonour that hung over me kept me quiet, almost stunned. I parted from her as usual at the Reading station, and then went on to London with Richard Fairfax to prosecute my search—for I need not tell you of another mission whose result has been to throw me a helpless wounded man upon your charity so long, Nelly!

“What a search it was! A man who, till yesterday, had held his head up honourably among his peers, going by stealth in quest of his own shame, the details of his own, or, as men hold it, worse, of his wife’s dishonoured past!

“Poor little girl,” he broke off, as the great tears rose in Nelly’s pitying eyes. “Don’t look so intensely miserable! No man ever died of grief any more than I shall! Besides, what I am going to tell you is only the preface, the prelude, to the story. The story itself is being acted out now. Time enough to grieve, Nelly, when we

come to the catastrophe. An event which, God grant, may not be very far distant!" added Bryanstone, bitterly.

* * * * *

"I had no hesitation as to the manner of carrying out my inquiries," he went on, after a minute or two of silence. "The leading fact to be proved was this. Where did Honoria Forrester live during the years spoken of by Sir Hyde Bryanstone? The old ladies from whose hands she passed into the charge of Mrs. Forsyth were, obviously, the persons to whom I must first address myself; and on arriving in London I at once set to work to find them out. Honoria had accidentally, or otherwise, informed me during our journey to town that they now lived in Guilford Street; but on calling there I found them, as I more than suspected, gone; and it took me several hours before I could trace them to their new abode at Brixton. A feeling I can't explain told me that, if Honoria was guilty, these women, in some way or other, would be her accomplices, and yet my first look at old Miss Jarvis, when she came into the room

to receive me, made my confidence in her complete. She was a venerable old woman, silver-haired, quiet-spoken, subdued ; a woman whom you could not look at and suspect of confederacy in such a plot as the one I sought to unravel. She made me a frightened, old-fashioned curtesy as she entered, apologized for having kept me—I had waited about a minute and a-half—informed me her sister Jane would be down directly, then seated herself upon the extreme verge of a chair opposite me, and began uttering mild little didactic commonplaces, as I doubt not she had been in the habit of doing with the parents of her pupils, upon the state of the clouds, and the prospect of more rain before night.

“ ‘Madam,’ I said, bluntly, ‘I am pressed for time, and I have come here to ask you a question of singular importance to myself and another person. Excuse me if I ask it abruptly. Was Honoria Forrester under your charge from the year 184— to 185—, or was she not?’ ”

“ ‘Honoria Forrester!’ she exclaimed, looking at me, I thought, with terrified eyes, as

though I must have some bad motive to cover by this sudden question. 'Certainly, certainly. She was under my charge for seven years, sir ; until, indeed, my sister's health forced us to give up our school, and then she went to our dear friend, Mrs. Forsyth. Did I,' and she rubbed her hands together with unmistakeable eager nervousness, 'know anything of Honoria Forrester now ?'

"I answered, drily enough, I should think that I did know something about her, and that Miss Forrester was well, and married. And I then put the following sufficiently point-blank question: Was Miss Forrester's conduct invariably good during the time that she lived in Miss Jarvis's establishment ?

"Nelly, if the old woman had thrown up her hands and gone into ecstacies I should have doubted her, as I do all theatrical demonstrations ; but she did nothing of the kind. The question, in a certain sense, did not even seem to take her by surprise. Miss Forrester was by no means a perfect character, she answered. She had been vilely brought up as a child, and

her temper was originally, and radically, bad. Her good qualities lay in her patience, and in the resolution with which she set herself to master any subject, either for herself or her pupils, to which she had once made up her mind. She was never loved by the children, neither did she love them, or open out much to her superiors.

“ ‘As far as conduct goes,’ added the old lady, in a calm, business-like way, ‘the rules of the house only admitted of good conduct. During the seven years Miss Forrester lived with us, she had not more than half-a-dozen holidays, and the vacation she spent at school.’ ”

“And you doubted any longer?” cried Nelly, warmly. “Mr. Bryanstone, did you require further proof after this?”

“Yes, Nelly, I sought for, and obtained, further proof. Up to that day my bride’s portrait hung in a little locket from my watch-chain. The sentimental relic, a present from her soon after my marriage, had its use now. When the other Miss Jarvis entered the room, and before her sister had opened her lips, I took the locket

from my chain, and put it into the hands of the younger sister, remarking simply, at the same time, that I had come to speak to her about one of her old friends.

“ ‘Honorina Forrester!’ she exclaimed, in a moment. “Honorina—but how much improved! Sister, have you seen?’

“They compared notes over the photograph together, one thinking their dearest Honorina so much improved, the other so much aged, by having got stout; but their recognition of the likeness was indisputable. I have seen too much of human beings, I think, to mistake any genuine bit of nature for acting. These women recognised in my wife’s photograph the likeness of the pupil-governess, Honorina Forrester, who had lived daily, hourly, under their sight for more than seven years. I had stronger evidence still, as to the likeness being a good one. The old servant who had opened the house door came into the room with coals at this moment, and the younger Miss Jarvis put the locket, without saying a word, into her hands.

“ ‘Gracious, Miss Jane,’ she cried, ‘why,

here's Mamselle again.' Honoria had always told me she passed as 'Mamselle' among the children and servants. 'Mamselle Onore, as natural as ever I seen her, only a little stouter—stouter and more the lady like, as is natural.'

"And then she, too, joined hotly in the argument as to whether Mamselle had improved or not. 'For certain, she ain't ashamed of her red hair as she used to be!' she remarked, pointing out the frizzled masses, the falling curls in which Mrs. Bryanstone had chosen to be taken. 'I mind when she used to grease it and plait it all up as tight as she could plait it to her head for fear of the children calling her "carrots," but I'm told red hair's the fashion now, and Mamselle always dearly loved to follow that.'

"Now, I am certain Honoria's hair was never red. Red hair may change to auburn, or to black; never to yellow. But she had often told me not only how, in her youth, she and others had called her hair brick-dust, but how she had oiled and plastered it in her hopes of getting rid of the imputation. The old servant's remark identified her more thoroughly therefore


with 'Mamselle' than the Misses Jarvis had done. When I left the house I felt the result of my visit to be this : I had the testimony of three separate, unbiassed witnesses as to my wife's portrait being the portrait of the Honoria Forrester who once lived in Miss Jarvis's school ; and I had the direct and positive assurance of Miss Jarvis herself as to Honoria Forrester never once leaving her protection between the years of 184— and 185—; while, on the other side, was the bare, unsupported assertion of one individual that my wife, formerly Honoria Forrester, had been a public ballet-dancer in Paris at precisely the same date.

"I don't say my mind was set at rest," went on Bryanstone, "but it was certainly rid of the greater part of its burthen when I returned to my hotel to dinner. That Honoria's past life was free from mystery—that *all* she had told me respecting it was true, I did not think ; for other testimony than Sir Hyde's was busy in my mind against her. That it was fully possible that Sir Hyde's special accusation against her was unfounded I did think ; and I was mentally

revolving words in which I should inform him of my opinion, when one of the waiters entered my room and delivered to me a letter directed in Sir Hyde Bryanstone's hand. This letter you shall see."

And Bryanstone rose, walked feebly to the table, and, after some delay, produced a letter from one of the drawers of his dressing-case. "Here it is, Nelly," he said, "lying—what a queer juxtaposition—under one of the little notes I had from you at Lowick! Stay, I'll make it out for you. Sir Hyde's handwriting is the only thing about him that is not mathematically precise." And Bryanstone, after getting back into his easy-chair, read aloud as follows:—

"MY DEAR HENRY,—I am afraid you werehipped by what I told you last night. Many men would take a more philosophical view of the position—see into the matter at once, and if possible, regain their freedom with resignation. Should you think this, or indeed whatever you think, the enclosed notice, cut as you may see from an old *Galignani*, may prove of service to



you. Reynan is the man for you to see; he was ballet-manager of the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin at the time when Nita first appeared there, and is a very good fellow—that is to say, one of the greatest rogues in Paris, in his way. The police will tell you his whereabouts.

‘Your affectionate uncle, H. B.’

“And this was the enclosure—‘We have, among other novelties at the minor theatres, to notice especially the appearance of La petite Nita, about whom all Paris—Paris of the Quartier Latin, at least, is wild. Mademoiselle Nita Dupont (or rather Miss F——; we assume her English extraction to be no secret) has still everything to learn as an artiste; but her youth and peculiar beauty would have made the sternest critics lenient last Saturday night. The storm of applause, the wild showers of bouquets that descended around Mademoiselle Nita at the close of the ballet, could scarcely have been more rapturously accorded had the possessor of that golden head and childish face been the possessor also of the most finished art in Europe.’

“And that cursed parenthesis,” proceeded Bryanstone, “slight as was the clue it afforded, was sufficient to rekindle my first and darkest suspicions. F. might point to a hundred other names besides Forrester, of course; but, taken in conjunction with my uncle’s positive certainty as to the identity, the coincidence was more than startling. As to the testimony of the Misses Jarvis, was it not possible that I had after all been a dupe of them and of their servant? What did I know of these women? I began to ask myself, in fierce self-condemnation for my too easy credence of their words. If deception had been practised; little doubt as to their having been in the conspiracy! Was their manner wholly unguarded and natural? Had not the old servant let slip the words ‘why, there’s Mamselle *again*?’—had there not been ample time for Honoria to warn them by telegraph of my coming, if, as was more than probable, she had remarked any coldness in my manner at parting, and had suspected me of searching into her affairs?”

“I would give no time for further preparation, for further warning, now. Whatever it might

be possible to gather in Paris respecting the dancer, Miss F——, or ‘Nita,’ I would learn at once. I ate my dinner with what appetite I could, Nelly ; wrote a few lines to Sir Hyde, thanking him for his letter and its enclosure ; started by the night train for Folkestone ; and at noon on the following day had found out the man I wanted—M. Reynan, in Paris.

“With the first words he spoke to me, I saw that I was on the right track at last.”

END OF VOL. II.





